TO THE READER

KINDLY use this book very carefully. If the book is disfigured or marked or written on while in your possession the book will have to be replaced by a new copy or paid for. In case the book be a volume of set of which single volumes are not available the price of the whole set will be realized.

85

AMARSINGH COLLEGE

LIGHT MORE LIGHT
A.S. COLLEGE

Checked
81 82
Checked
1978

Library

Class No. F

Book No. S61M

Acc. No. 8883

MAIGRET AND M. LABBÉ

By the same Author

THE PATIENCE OF MAIGRET
MAIGRET TRAVELS SOUTH
MAIGRET ABROAD
MAIGRET TO THE RESCUE
MAIGRET KEEPS A RENDEZ-VOUS
MAIGRET SITS IT OUT

Georges Simenon

MAIGRET AND M. LABBÉ

Translated from the French by

STUART GILBERT

LONDON

GEORGE ROUTLEDGE & SONS LTD.

BROADWAY HOUSE: 68-74 CARTER LANE, E.C. 4

First published in England, 1941

823
Si 44 M

Printed in Great Britain by T. and A. CONSTABLE LTD.
at the University Press, Edinburgh

CONTENTS

I. DEATH OF A HARBOUR-MASTER

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	The Cat in the House	1
II.	The Will	19
III.	The Store-Cupboard	34
IV.	The Schooner	46
V.	Notre Dame des Dunes	59
VI.	The Mayor's Mishap	71
VII.	Maigret sets the Pace	84
VIII.	The Mayor's Enquiry	94
IX.	A Conspiracy of Silence	106
X.	On Board the *Saint Michel*	117
XI.	The Sand-Bank	130
XII.	The Unfinished Letter	142
XIII.	The House Opposite	160

II. THE MAN FROM EVERYWHERE

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	At the *Relais d'Alsace*	177
II.	The Hole in the Wall	191
III.	On the Honeck	204
IV.	The Commodore's Nose	217
V.	Decline and Fall	230
VI.	The Three Doors	241
VII.	New Developments	253
VIII.	Watches of the Night	266
IX.	The Fugitives	278
X.	The Lead Casket	291
XI.	One Man Less	302

DEATH OF A HARBOUR-MASTER

Translated from the French:

Le Port des Brumes

AMAR SINGH COLLEGE
ACC. NO. 8888
LIBRARY, SRINAGAR.

Cat
Wr
28.6.56.
F
S 84 M
28 -
20/6/56-

Chapter I

THE CAT IN THE HOUSE

WHEN the Cherbourg train left Paris, just before three, the cool clear sunlight of an October afternoon still bathed the busy streets. Thirty miles out, when it was nearing Nantes, the lights had been turned on in the compartments. Half an hour later, when the train reached Evreux, it was quite dark. Across the dripping windows nothing could now be seen but a dense fog, through which now and again a railway signal glimmered for a moment, fringed by iridescent sheen.

Slumped in a corner seat, his head resting on the padded back, Maigret watched with half-closed eyes the oddly assorted couple facing him.

Captain Joris was asleep. On that enigmatic, shaven head of his the wig had slipped askew; his clothes were rumpled, travel-stained.

Julie was firmly clutching her bag, a cheap affair in imitation crocodile-skin, and gazing straight in front of her. Tired though she was, she was obviously determined not to give way to fatigue, and to keep up appearances.

Joris. Julie. A puzzling pair.

It was nothing new for Inspector Maigret to have people crashing in like this—out of the blue, so to speak—into his life, and monopolizing it for days, weeks, or even months on end; only to relapse once more into the common herd of nondescripts.

The rumbling wheels set a rhythm to his thoughts, the

thoughts that always haunted him at the start of an investigation. Would it be an interesting case or mere routine-work; dull or eventful?

As Maigret gazed at Joris a smile hovered on his lips. A rum bloke! "Bloke" came naturally, for at Headquarters during the last five days this stalwart, stockily built seaman in the early fifties had been known merely as "The Bloke."

Noticing a man behaving in a peculiar manner, dodging in and out amongst the traffic, a constable on duty on the Central Boulevards had taken him into custody. He had been questioned in French. No answer. Seven or eight foreign languages were tried without success. A deaf-mute expert likewise had drawn blank.

A lunatic? He had been searched in Maigret's office. His suit and undergarments were brand-new. Tailor's and shirt-maker's names had been cut out. No identity papers. No wallet. But, tucked into a coat pocket, five crisp thousand-franc notes.

The enquiry had got on everybody's nerves. Police registers and anthropometric records had been ransacked. Telegrams despatched all over France, and abroad. And from morn till night, under a perpetual cross-fire of questions, "The Bloke" had just gone on smiling, quite happily, to himself. Throughout the ordeal he had not once protested, never shown emotion; sometimes he seemed to make an effort to remember, but gave in almost at once.

Loss of memory? The wig had fallen off his head, and it was found that a bullet had perforated the top of the man's skull, not more than two months previously. The doctors were all admiration; rarely had they seen a damaged skull repaired so neatly.

A new batch of telegrams went out, to hospitals and nursing-homes in France, Belgium, Germany, and Holland.

Five strenuous days had been wasted in enquiries on these lines.

Chemical analysis of the stains on the man's clothes and the dust in his pockets had given odd results. Some traces had been found of a fishy substance used as sardine bait and peculiar to the northern coast of Norway, where cod-roes are dried and ground up for this purpose.

Did this mean he came from those parts? Was he a Scandinavian? There were indications that he had made a long railway journey. But how could he have managed it alone, unable to utter a word, and wearing that queer, bewildered air which made him so conspicuous?

His photograph was published in the papers. A wire came from Ouistreham: *Unknown man identified.* It was followed up by a young woman, who burst into Maigret's office. A young woman with a haggard face, clumsily rouged and powdered; Julie Legrand, "The Bloke's" housekeeper.

So now he was "The Bloke" no longer; he had a name, a place in the community. He was Yves Joris, a retired sea-captain, now harbour-master at Ouistreham.

Julie burst into tears. Julie simply couldn't understand! When she implored him to speak, the man merely gazed at her good-humouredly, as he did at everyone else.

Captain Joris had disappeared from Ouistreham, a small port on the north coast between Trouville and Cherbourg, on September 16. It was now the end of October.

What had he been doing during those six unaccountable weeks?

"He went to the ship-canal," Julie explained, "to take his turn of duty at the lock. High water was late that night. I didn't wait up for him. Next morning, when I went to his bedroom he wasn't there."

The night had been foggy. He might have missed his

footing and fallen into the lock. It had been dragged without result. Another theory had then been put forward: perhaps he'd had a sudden fancy for a jaunt to Paris, or elsewhere.

"Lisieux. Three minutes' stop."

Maigret stepped out on to the platform to stretch his legs. He filled his pipe again. He had smoked so many pipes since leaving Paris that you could have cut the air in the compartment with a knife.

"Take your seats."

Julie had seized the opportunity to dab her nose with her puff. Her eyes were still red with weeping.

Curious! There were moments when she looked quite attractive, *chic* almost by Parisian standards; others when, though one couldn't say just why, her peasant origin showed definitely through.

She straightened the wig on the Captain's head, casting a glance at Maigret as though to say, "He has only me to look after him, you know." For Joris had no family. For years he had lived alone, except for Julie, whom he called his housekeeper. She always referred to him as "her gentleman."

"He treated me like a daughter."

A quiet man. No enemies; no love-affairs, no vices. After knocking about the world for thirty years, he had settled down for good, it seemed, to blameless domesticity. But he couldn't resign himself to idleness. After giving up the sea he had applied for the post of harbour-master at Ouistreham. He had built a little house there.

Then one fine evening—the sixteenth of September—he'd vanished from the face of the earth; only to reappear in Paris six weeks later, and in what a state!

Julie had been quite shocked at finding him dressed in a ready-made grey lounge suit. Never before had she seen him in anything but uniform.

She was obviously nervous. Something was weighing on her mind. Every time she turned towards the Captain her look expressed compassion, but something else: an obscure, rankling apprehension. It was he—"her gentleman"—sure enough. And yet, somehow, it wasn't altogether he!

"He'll recover, won't he? Luckily I'm good at nursing."

The moisture on the windows was condensing into turbid drops of water. The Inspector's massive head was gently swaying from side to side with the movement of the train. And all the time, placidly, he was observing the two in front of him: Julie, who had pointed out that they might just as well have travelled Third, as she always did; Joris, who was waking up and gazing dreamily about him.

Another stop, at Caen. The next would be for Ouistreham.

"A village with a thousand or so inhabitants," one of Maigret's colleagues, who came from those parts, had told him. "The harbour's small, but a busy one because of the ship-canal linking the roadstead with the city of Caen. It takes ships of five thousand tons and more."

Maigret made no attempt to imagine what the place was like. He knew too well how misleading such mental pictures always are. He waited, letting his gaze roam constantly towards the wig which hid the pink streak of a scar.

At the time of his disappearance Captain Joris had had thick, dark brown hair, only faintly greying at the temples. Another source of distress for Julie; she couldn't bear the sight of that bald head! And every time the wig slipped awry, she made haste to set it straight.

"Obviously someone was out to kill him," Maigret mused. "That shot was aimed at his head. But obviously, too, someone patched up that head with quite extraordinary skill. He had no money with him when he went; when he was found he had five thousand francs in his pocket."

More was to come. Abruptly Julie opened her bag.

"I forgot to tell you. I brought along his letters."

Nothing much. Ship-chandlers' catalogues. A receipt for a subscription to the Merchant Service League. Picture-postcards from friends still at sea; one from Punta Arenas.

A letter from the Caen branch of the Banque de Normandie. A printed form with the blanks typewritten in:

We beg to advise you that your Account, No. 14173, *has been credited with the sum of* 300,000 *frs.* (*three hundred thousand francs*) *transferred under your instructions from the Dutch Bank, Hamburg.*

Yet Julie had persistently assured him that the Captain wasn't at all well off. Once again Maigret fixed his eyes on the curious pair of people on the opposite seat.

Cod-roe powder. Hamburg. Those obviously "Made-in-Germany" shoes. Bits of a puzzle that only "The Bloke" himself could fit together. And Joris, seeing Maigret's eyes intent on him, promptly responded with the friendliest of smiles.

"Caen. Passengers for Cherbourg, keep your seats. All change for Lion-sur-Mer, Luc, Ouistreham."

Seven o'clock. The air was so saturated with moisture that the platform lamps seemed wrapped in cotton-wool.

"What do we do now?" Maigret asked Julie as they pushed their way through the crowd on the platform.

"There aren't any more trains. In winter the local runs only twice a day."

Luckily there were taxis waiting outside. Maigret was hungry. He decided to take no risks, and dine in the refreshment-room.

Captain Joris was still on his best behaviour. He ate whatever was set before him, like a docile, well-mannered

child. A railway employee paused for a moment by the table, staring at Joris; then whispered in Maigret's ear:

"Ain't that the harbour-master from Ouistreham, sir?" And tapped his forehead significantly with his forefinger.

When Maigret nodded he moved away, obviously thrilled by the encounter.

When the bill came, Julie's housewifely instincts were properly revolted.

"Just fancy asking twelve francs for a dinner like this! Why, they don't even use butter for their cooking. We'd have done better to go straight home and have our dinner there."

As she spoke, Maigret was thinking: A bullet through his head . . . Three hundred thousand francs. . . . And his keen gaze bored into Joris's mild eyes; his lips set in a hard, menacing line.

The taxi which drew up beside them had been a private car in happier days; now its cushions were battered, it creaked at every joint. The three of them bundled into the back—for the flap-seats had been dismantled—, Julie wedged between the two men and crushed by each in turn.

As they approached the house her mind became more and more preoccupied with domestic cares. "I wonder now!" she murmured. "Did I lock the garden gate?"

The fog outside the town was like a solid mass of clotted darkness. They did not catch sight of a horse and cart coming towards them till it was under two yards away. A phantom horse, a phantom cart. And the trees and houses beside the road seemed equally wraithlike.

The driver slowed down to a bare six miles an hour. Even so, a man on a bicycle, emerging suddenly from the fog, blundered into the side of the car. The driver stopped. The cyclist was unhurt.

They crossed the village of Ouistreham. Julie let down the window and called to the driver :

"Drive down to the harbour and cross the swing-bridge. Stop at the house just before the lighthouse."

Outlined by the pale glimmer of a row of gas-lamps, a road ran straight down from the village to the harbour, which was about half a mile away. No one was about at that hour.

"That's the *Sailors' Rest*." Julie pointed through the window at a little café on the roadside. "The lock-keepers spend most of their time there."

After the bridge came a mere apology for a road, floundering through the fenlands bordering the Orne. It led only to the lighthouse and a cottage surrounded by a small garden. Here the car stopped. Maigret observed Joris's movements. He got out of the car of his own accord and walked at once to the gate.

"See that, sir ?" Julie exclaimed in a flutter of delight. "He recognized the house. I'm sure he'll be himself again, one day."

She took out her key, opened the creaking iron gate and walked up the gravel path. After paying the driver, Maigret walked quickly after her. Once the car had gone, they were in total darkness.

"Would you strike a light, please ? I can't find the keyhole."

A tiny flame. The door opened. A dark form slipped out, brushing against Maigret's calf. Julie entered the hall, turned on the light. Then she halted, gazing at the floor in a puzzled way.

"That was the cat went out just now, wasn't it ?"

She took off her hat and coat, hung them on a peg, walked straight to the kitchen and switched on the light—unconsciously indicating that this was the room in which the occupants of the house usually spent their evenings.

A cheerful-looking kitchen. Tiled floor and walls, a big, well-scoured deal table, gleaming copper pans. Automatically the Captain went up to a wickerwork armchair beside the fireplace and sat down in it.

"It's queer. I could have sworn I put the cat out, as usual." She was thinking aloud; her brows were wrinkled. "Yes, I'm positive. And the doors are locked all right." She turned to Maigret. "I wonder would you mind, sir, having a look round the house with me? To tell the truth, I'm nervous."

So much so that she could hardly bring herself to lead the way. She entered the dining-room, where the extreme tidiness, spotless floor and furniture showed that the room was seldom used.

"Would you mind looking behind the curtains?"

A cottage piano. Some bits of Chinese lacquerware, three porcelain bowls: souvenirs of the Captain's voyages East.

In the parlour, too, the furniture was equally well kept; in practically the same state as when it had figured in some show-window. The Captain followed them, complacent, almost beaming. They walked up the stairs, which were carpeted in red. There were three bedrooms, one not in use.

These rooms, too, were spick and span, each object in its place. And there was a homely fragrance, of country fields and cooking, in the air.

No one was hiding anywhere. Windows were shut and bolted. The garden gate was locked, though the key had been left in it.

"The cat may have got in through a ventilator," Maigret suggested.

"There isn't one."

They returned to the kitchen. Julie opened a cupboard.

"Would you like something to drink, sir?"

And this was the moment—when she was bustling to and fro, pouring liqueurs into tiny glasses adorned with coloured flowers—this was the moment she chose to break down, in a flood of tears.

She shot a furtive, tearful glance at the Captain, who had gone back to his chair. And the sight of him was so distressing that she had to turn away. To give her thoughts a new direction she said to Maigret:

"I'll get the spare-room ready for you."

Her voice was shaken by sobs. She took down a white apron hanging on the wall and dabbed her eyes with it.

"Thank you, I'd rather stay at the hotel. . . . I suppose there is one here?" he added.

She glanced up at a small china clock, of the type that figures as a prize at country fairs, the humble household god of many a French cottage kitchen.

"Yes. It's not too late; you'll find them up. The hotel's just beyond the lock, behind the café I showed you from the taxi."

But she was obviously in half a mind to implore him to stay. She seemed to dread the idea of being left alone with the Captain, at whom she could no longer bring herself to glance.

"Are you sure there's nobody hiding in the house?"

"You could see for yourself there isn't anybody."

"You'll come back first thing tomorrow, won't you?"

She accompanied him to the front door, slamming it behind him the moment he was outside.

The fog was so thick that Maigret could not see where he was treading. Somehow he found his way to the gate. There was the feel of grass underfoot; then of a stony road. As he started down the road he heard a distant sound which, for quite a while, he was unable to account for.

It was like the lowing of a cow, but more mournful, more resonant.

"Of course!" he muttered. "What a fool I am! It's a foghorn."

He had only the vaguest idea of where he was. Then he noticed, vertically below, a patch of water which seemed to be steaming. He was standing on the edge of the lock. From somewhere near at hand there came a sound of turning winches. Where had the taxi crossed the canal? He couldn't remember. Noticing a foot-bridge, he started to cross it.

"Stand back!"

Incredible! The voice was almost in his ear. He had supposed he was quite alone, and all the time there was a man standing within a few feet of him. Peering across the fog, he made out the outlines of a tall black form.

He realized at once why the man had shouted. The foot-bridge on to which he had been about to step began to edge away. It was the lock-gate slowly opening, and the sight was even more impressive when, where the man had been, there towered up, only a yard or so in front, a sheer, black wall, high as a house. Above the moving wall a line of lights glimmered through the fog.

A ship was passing, so close he could have touched it. A hawser dropped beside him; someone snatched it up, dragged it to a bollard, and made it fast.

High up, on the steamer's bridge, a voice cried, "Half speed astern!" then, "Stand by!"

A few moments before, the place had seemed empty, lifeless. Now, as he walked along the edge of the lock, Maigret discovered that the fog was humming with activity. Someone was turning a winch, a man rushed by him with another mooring-rope. A group of customs officers stood waiting for the gangway to be lowered before going on board.

Sightless but skilful movements in a dank mist that fringed the men's moustaches with big drops of water.

"Want to cross?" A voice quite near again. Another lock-gate. "Hurry up, or you'll have a quarter of an hour to wait."

As, gripping the handrail, he crossed the bridge, he could hear water gushing in below through the sluices and, remote as ever, the baying of the foghorn. The farther he proceeded, the more the world of fog around seemed teeming with mysterious life. A faint glow of light drew him towards it. He saw a fisherman in a boat moored to the bank, lowering and raising a net slung between two poles. The fisherman cast him a casual glance, then started sorting out the small fry in a basket.

In the zone of brightness made by the steamer's lights he could now see people moving to and fro. They were speaking English on deck. On the edge of the quay a man in a braided cap was checking documents.

The harbour-master, presumably; the man who had taken Joris's place. Like Joris, he was short, but more wiry and alert-looking. He was bandying jokes with the ship's officers.

The visible world had shrunk to a few square yards of relative illumination beyond which lay a netherworld of darkness, hiding land and sea. The sea must be somewhere on his left, where he heard a murmur of waves.

Was it not on just such a night as this that Joris had so mysteriously vanished? Like the fellow yonder, he had been checking ship's papers; cracking jokes, most likely; watching from the corner of an eye the activities of the lock-keepers. Didn't need to see, though. Probably a few familiar sounds told him all he required to know. Just as nobody here looks where he goes, Maigret reflected.

He had just lit a pipe and was frowning at his thoughts. "Compared with these fellows I'm just a damn-fool landlubber. Everything to do with the sea is right outside my range." And he resented feeling so feebly ineffectual.

The lock-gates opened. The steamer glided into a canal nearly as wide as the Seine at Paris.

"Good evening. You're the harbour-master, aren't you? I'm Inspector Maigret of the Paris police. I've just brought back your predecessor."

"What? Is Joris back? So it was he after all. I only heard of it this morning. Is it a fact that he's . . . ?"

He tapped his forehead.

"Yes—for the moment. Are you stopping here all night?"

"No. We never stay more than five hours at a stretch. Two and a half hours on either side of high water. There are five hours each tide when there's enough water for ships to enter the canal or go out. It's a different time every day. Tonight we've just started, and we'll be at it till three in the morning."

A simple, downright fellow. He spoke to Maigret as to a colleague; as one public servant to another.

"Excuse me." The harbour-master turned and gazed seawards. Nothing was visible, yet he said: "A sailing-boat from Boulogne's made fast to the piles of the jetty, waiting for the gates to open."

"Do you always know in advance what ships are due in?"

"Generally. Steamers especially. Most of them are on a regular run, bringing coal from England and shipping ore from Caen."

"What about a drink?" Maigret suggested.

"Not till the ebb, thanks. I can't get away."

He shouted some orders; the men were quite invisible, but he knew exactly where they were.

"You've been sent here to make an enquiry, eh?"

A sound of footsteps coming up the road from the village. A man walked past the lock-gate; as he walked under a lamp a gun-barrel glinted on his shoulder.

"Who was that?"

"The mayor, off on a duck-shoot. He's rigged up a shooting-pit for himself on the bank of the Orne. His man's there already, I expect, getting things ready for him."

"Think I'll find the hotel open?"

"The *Univers*? Yes. But you'd better get a move on. It's near the time the landlord finishes his game of cards and closes down. And once he's in bed he wouldn't budge for the President himself!"

"Thanks. I'll look you up tomorrow."

"Right. I come on duty here at ten, for the morning tide."

They shook hands; neither had really seen the other's face. A blind man's world—of sightless contacts. There was nothing actually sinister about it, but Maigret was conscious of a certain uncanniness, of something in the air that fretted the nerves; of the sensation of being in a land of shadows, peopled by men who went their secret ways, a life in which he had no place. . . . That sailing-ship, for instance, waiting its turn; it must be quite near, but there wasn't the faintest sign of it.

He passed again the fisherman sitting under his lamp, and was moved to speak to him.

"Any luck?"

The man merely spat into the water. Maigret walked on, furious with himself for making so idiotic a remark.

The last sound he heard before stepping into the hotel was the clatter of the shutters' being closed on the top floor of Joris's cottage.

Julie's nervousness. The cat that had slipped out when they were entering the house . . .

"Will the foghorn go on making that blasted noise all night?" Maigret enquired peevishly of the hotel proprietor, who had just approached him.

"As long as the fog lasts. But you get used to it."

He had a restless night—the sort of night that comes of overeating, or when, as a child, one is looking forward to a great treat next day. Twice he rose and pressed his forehead to the icy panes, but all he could see was the empty road and the veering lighthouse-beam struggling to pierce a cloud-bank. And all night the foghorn kept on baying, more stridently, it seemed, than ever.

On the second occasion he looked at his watch. It was 4 a.m. There was a clatter of wooden clogs on the road: fishermen tramping down to their boats, baskets slung across their backs.

Almost immediately afterwards, as it seemed to him, there was a banging on his door. It opened before he'd had time to say "Come in." It was the proprietor of the hotel. Seriously upset, judging by his expression.

More time had passed than Maigret had supposed, for sunlight was streaming through the windows. The foghorn, however, was still at it, full blast.

"Get up. The Captain's dying."

"What Captain?"

"Joris. Julie's just rushed down to the village to fetch the doctor. She told me to let you know at once."

Maigret had already pulled on his shirt and trousers. He thrust his feet into his shoes without troubling to lace them up. Nor did he trouble to brush his tousled hair. He slipped on his coat and ran down the stairs, collarless.

"Won't you have something before you go? A cup of coffee? A glass of rum?"

Maigret shook his head impatiently and rushed out.

Though the sun was bright, the air was nippy. The road was still drenched with dew.

As he hurried across the lock he had a brief glimpse of the sea, a pale expanse of blue; only a narrow strip, for the fog-bank began quite near the shore.

On the bridge one of the local police hailed him.

"You the Inspector, sir, from Paris? Good morning, sir. Have you heard—?"

"What?"

"It's horrible, they say. . . . Hullo! That's the doctor's car."

Down in the harbour fishing-smacks were gently rocking at their moorings, dappling the water with glints of red and green. Some sails were set, to dry presumably; each had a number painted on it, in black.

Two or three women were standing outside the Captain's cottage, close by the lighthouse. The door was open. The doctor's car dashed past Maigret and the policeman, who was keeping at his side.

"There's talk of poison. They say his face has gone all green!"

As Maigret entered the house Julie was coming slowly down the stairs. Her eyes were swollen with weeping, her cheeks darkly flushed. The doctor, who was now examining his patient, had bundled her out of the bedroom.

She had had no time to dress, and had slipped an overcoat over her long white nightgown. Her slippered feet were bare.

"It's too terrible, sir. You simply can't imagine . . . Do please go up at once. Perhaps . . ."

When Maigret opened the door, the doctor, who had been bending over the bed, was just straightening up. The expression on his face showed that he had given up hope.

"Police," said Maigret.

"Yes? Quite so. . . . It's all over. Two or three minutes more, perhaps. Strychnine, unless I'm greatly mistaken."

He went to the window and flung it wide open, as the dying man seemed to be gasping for breath. Maigret had a glimpse of the sunlit harbour: fishing-boats and flapping sails, fishermen emptying creels of silvery fish into wooden boxes. And somehow the whole scene looked unreal, like a painted backcloth.

When he turned towards the bed, the dying man's face seemed greener, even more livid than before. Its colour was incredible—quite unlike any idea one has of the colour of human skin.

The limbs were jerking spasmodically, like the limbs of a grotesque clockwork doll. And yet his look was placid as ever, his features in repose, his eyes fixed on the wall in front of him.

The doctor's fingers rested on his wrist, timing the failing pulse. A moment came when his look conveyed: "Now for it! He's going. . . ."

But then something extraordinary happened; extraordinary and deeply touching. There had been no knowing if the unfortunate man had got back his reason; certainly there had been no sign of it. Now, of a sudden, his face seemed to come to life. His features quivered like a child's on the brink of tears, in a look of utter, inconsolable distress.

And two big tears welled up, and hovered at the corners of his eyes.

Almost immediately the doctor said in a toneless voice:

"He's dead."

Was it possible? The notion of a dead man weeping seemed preposterous. Yet, as a tear that seemed alive trickled off into the hollow of an ear, the man who shed it had ceased to live.

Hearing the sound of footsteps on the stairs, Maigret went out on to the landing and said commandingly:

"No one is to enter the bedroom."

"Is he . . .?"

"Yes."

He could hear Julie sobbing passionately in the hall and some women trying to console her.

When he went back to the sunlit bedroom, he found the doctor, syringe in hand, administering a heart injection—merely for conscience' sake.

From the window he could see a white cat basking on the garden wall.

Chapter II

THE WILL

SOMEWHERE downstairs, probably in the kitchen, Julie was still giving vent to her distress; Maigret could hear her shrill cries, though the bedroom door was closed.

The window had remained open, and he now saw people pouring helter-skelter out of the village: boys on bicycles, women with babies in their arms, men in clogs. They streamed across the bridge in a small ragged procession, then spread out and hurried towards the Captain's cottage. They were behaving exactly as they would have behaved had a travelling circus been sighted on the road, or had there been a motor accident.

Soon the din outside was such that Maigret shut the window. At once the room took on a different aspect. The garish morning light was mellowed by the muslin curtains to a gentle glow that played discreetly on the polished light-oak chairs, pale pink wall-paper, a bowl of flowers standing on the mantelpiece.

The doctor, Maigret noticed, was holding up to the light the water-bottle and tumbler he had found on the bedside table. He even dipped a finger in the tumbler and touched the tip of his tongue.

"So that was it?"

"Yes. Evidently the Captain had a habit of drinking at night. As far as I can judge, he must have had a drink at about three this morning. What I can't make out is why he didn't call for help."

Acc no 8883

"For the good reason," said Maigret rather gruffly, "that he was incapable of speaking, or uttering the least sound."

Calling the local policeman, he instructed him to report to the mayor and to the Public Prosecutor at Caen what had happened. There was still a good deal of commotion going on downstairs. Villagers were standing about in groups around the gate; others, to wait in greater comfort, had stretched themselves on the grass along the roadside.

The sand-banks at the harbour entrance were already submerged by the rising tide. A blur of smoke on the horizon showed where a steamer lay at anchor, waiting for high water before entering the lock.

"Have you any idea—?"

The doctor broke off, seeing that Maigret was busy. Between the two windows stood a mahogany writing-desk, and the Inspector had opened it. With the air of frowning concentration he always wore on such occasions he was making a list of the contents of the drawers. At such moments he looked positively churlish. He had lit his fat pipe and was puffing at it slowly, while his thick fingers handled without the least respect the objects they unearthed.

Photographs, for instance. There were dozens of them. Many were the photographs of friends, mostly men in naval uniform and of about the same age as Joris. It was obvious that he had kept in touch with his fellow-cadets of the Brest training-ship, and they wrote to him from every corner of the Seven Seas. Picture-postcards, too; all equally banal whether they hailed from Saigon or from Santiago, with such inscriptions as: "*All the best from Henry,*" "*My third stripe at last!! Cheero! Eugène.*" Most were addressed to "*Captain Joris, S.S. Diana, Anglo-Norman Navigation Co., Caen.*"

Maigret turned to the doctor.

"Had you known the Captain long?"

"Only a few months. Since he became harbour-master. Before that he was on one of the mayor's ships; commanded her for twenty-eight years."

"The mayor's ships?"

"Didn't you know? Our mayor, Monsieur Ernest Grandmaison, is Chairman of the Anglo-Norman. In other words, sole owner of the eleven steamers flying the Company's flag."

Another photograph, this time of Joris himself at the age of twenty-five. Already inclined to squatness, with a broad good-humoured face, in which, however, was a hint of obstinacy. A typical Breton.

Finally, in a canvas wallet was a sheaf of documents, ranging from a school award to a master's ticket in the merchant service; some official forms, a birth-certificate, a soldier's service-book, passports.

An envelope fell on the floor. Maigret picked it up. The paper was already yellow with age.

"Is it a Will?" asked the doctor, who had nothing more to do till the investigating magistrate arrived.

Evidently an atmosphere of trust prevailed in Captain Joris's cottage, for the envelope was not even closed. Inside was a sheet of paper, inscribed in a neat, copperplate hand.

I, Yves Antoine Joris, Captain in the Merchant Service, hereby give and bequeath all the real and personal estate of which I shall be possessed at the time of my decease to my servant Julie Legrand, in gratitude for her faithful service.

I instruct her to make the following bequests on my behalf: my dinghy to Captain Delcourt; my china dinner-service to his wife; my carved ivory walking-stick to . . .

Almost all the people whom Maigret had seen working in

the fog the night before, the small community of Port Ouistreham, had been remembered, down to the lock-hand, who was bequeathed a fishing-net—"the trammel hanging in the tool-shed," as the Will described it.

Just then there was a sound of hurried steps behind him. Julie had seized the opportunity, when the women with her were brewing a potion "to cheer the poor dear up," of slipping upstairs. She burst into the room, cast a scared glance around it, then sidled nervously towards the bed. But her courage failed her at the sight of death, and she drew back.

"Is he . . . ?"

She collapsed on to the carpet, murmuring broken phrases. "It can't be true! My poor gentleman! . . . No, I can't believe it."

Gravely Maigret bent down and raised her to her feet. Then, gently mastering her resistance, he shepherded her into the next room, her bedroom. It was in disorder. Clothes scattered on the bed, the basin full of soapy water.

"Who filled the water-bottle on his bedside table?"

"I did. Yesterday morning. At the same time as I put the flowers in the Captain's room."

"Were you alone at the time?"

Julie was still racked by sobs, but her self-possession was returning. Vaguely she sensed the drift of Maigret's questions.

"What are you imagining?" she suddenly demanded.

"I'm imagining nothing! . . . I've just read Joris's will."

"Well, what about it?"

"He leaves everything to you. You're a rich woman."

The only effect of the remark was another flood of tears.

"The Captain was poisoned," Maigret went on. "There was poison in the water on his bedside table."

She swung round on him, her eyes blazing with indignation.

"What are you trying to make out?" she shouted in his face. "Tell me straight! What are you getting at?"

In her excitement she had gripped his arm and was shaking it violently. She looked as if at any moment she might start clawing his cheeks.

"Steady on, Julie! Don't lose your head! The enquiry's only just beginning. I'm not hinting at anything. Merely gathering information."

The door was flung open. The village policeman entered.

"The examining magistrate can't be here before the beginning of the afternoon. The mayor was in bed; he'd been out all night duck-shooting. He says he'll come as soon as he can."

The nerves of all were strung to breaking-point. Even the crowd outside, though none of them could have said what they were expecting, were somehow conscious of the tension in the air.

Maigret turned to Julie again.

"Will you be staying here?"

"Why not? I've nowhere else to go."

Maigret asked the doctor to leave the bedroom; then locked the door. He allowed only two women to remain in the house—the lighthouse-keeper's wife and the wife of one of the men working at the lock—to keep Julie company. To the constable he said:

"Don't let anyone in. And see if you can't get the people outside to disperse—without using force, of course."

He walked to the gate, threaded his way through the gaping crowd, and made his way to the bridge. The foghorn could still be heard, but faintly now, as the wind was blowing off-shore. The tide was still rising.

Two of the lock-hands were already on their way back from the village for their spell of duty. On the bridge

Maigret encountered Captain Delcourt, who came up to him at once.

"I say, is it true?"

"That Joris has been poisoned? Yes."

"Who did it?"

The crowd outside the cottage was beginning to break up. The constable's work, evidently, for he could be seen gesticulating, moving from group to group. Maigret wondered what yarn he was telling them. For now their interest had shifted to himself; all eyes were turned in his direction.

"I see the tide's rising. Are you going on duty now?"

"Not yet. The water's still three feet short. See that steamer at anchor in the bay? She's been waiting since six o'clock this morning."

Quite a number of people were hovering in the background, not daring to come nearer: customs officers, the water-bailiff, the head lock-keeper, the skipper of the coast-guard cutter. Farther off, the lock-hands were getting ready for their day's work.

Maigret had now an opportunity of observing in broad daylight the men who had been round him last night, hidden by the fog. The *Sailors' Rest* was only a few steps away. Its windows overlooked the bridge, the lock and jetties, the lighthouse and Joris's cottage.

"How about a drink?" Maigret pointed to the little café. He felt pretty sure that the proposal was in order; that all these people regularly gathered there when the tide was making. The Captain paused to verify the height of the water.

"Right! I've half an hour in hand."

They entered the café, a wooden shack with a bar and half a dozen tables; after some brief hesitation, the others followed. Maigret beckoned to them to come and join him at his table.

The great thing now was to break the ice, somehow to win their confidence and make them feel at ease with him.

"What's it to be?"

They eyed each other; the constraint had not yet worn off. Then one of them took courage.

"Well, in the morning we usually have a cup of coffee, with a dash of brandy in it."

A woman served the drinks. The people coming from the cottage peeped into the café as they passed; then dispersed about the harbour, reluctant to go home lest they should miss some sensational development.

After filling his pipe, Maigret handed round his pouch. Captain Delcourt preferred a cigarette. The head lock-keeper, however, took a pinch of the tobacco and, blushing a little, put it into his mouth.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir . . ."

"A queer affair, isn't it?" Maigret remarked tentatively.

All had known that some such question was impending; none the less, there followed an embarrassed silence.

"This Captain Joris, now. By all accounts he was a quiet, harmless sort of man. . . ." He paused, covertly observing the men's faces.

"Quiet—that's him!" grinned Delcourt. He was a little older than his late colleague, less careful in his dress, and had, one felt, no aversion from strong liquor. All the same, even while he spoke, he didn't cease watching through the window the progress of the tide, and the steamer, which was now weighing anchor.

"He's moving a bit too soon. If he doesn't watch out, the current from the river will push him on the sand-bank."

"Here's luck! So, I take it, no one here knows what happened on the night of the sixteenth of September?"

"No one. There was a pea-soup fog on, like last night.

I wasn't on duty. But I stayed here all the same, having a game of cards with Joris and the other fellows—I mean, the fellows who're here now."

"Did you meet here every night?"

"Practically. There's precious little doing at Ouistreham —in the way of amusement, I mean. . . . Three or four times Joris got one of us to take his hand, when he had to go up to the lock and let a ship through. At nine-thirty he went off duty. He started back in the fog. We all thought he was going home."

"When did you learn he'd disappeared?"

"Next morning. Julie came to ask if we knew anything. She'd gone to bed without waiting up for Joris. Next morning, when she found he wasn't in his room, she was 'struck of a heap,' as she said."

"Had Joris had many drinks?"

"Not he!" put in the customs officer, not wishing to be left out of the conversation. "He never had more than one. And never smoked."

"Oh, by the way . . . Julie and he, were they—well, you see what I mean?"

There was a quick exchange of glances; some men smiled.

"Ask me another! Joris swore there wasn't anything. Only . . ."

The customs officer chipped in again.

"It's not that I'd anything against him, but—well, he wasn't quite the same as the rest of us. Not that he put on airs, only he was a bit stand-offish. He'd never have gone on duty at the lock in clogs, for instance, like Delcourt here does now and again. He'd join us in a game of cards most evenings, but he'd never drop in for a drink in the daytime. He didn't call the fellows at the lock by their Christian names. . . . I wonder if you see what I'm driving at?"

Maigret saw it very well. He had spent some hours in Joris's home, the tidy, well-appointed home of a man of modest means and quiet tastes. The men here were of a very different type—rougher, more free-and-easy in their ways. Here short drinks went down, he guessed, at a high speed; voices rose, the atmosphere grew thick, the talk a trifle bawdy on occasion.

Joris dropped in simply for a game of cards, never talked about his private affairs, and departed after a single drink.

"They've been together for eight years and more. She was sixteen when she came to him—and a slovenly, badly dressed little thing she was in those days."

"And now?"

Without being called, the waitress came up with a bottle of brandy and poured another tot into the glasses, where there now remained only some dregs of coffee. This, too, was doubtless a ritual of the place.

"And now she's—well, you've seen our Mademoiselle Julie. She fancies herself. At our local hops, for instance, she won't dance with anybody and everybody, not she! And if they treat her like a servant when she's shopping, she flies off the handle. That's how she is. You'd never believe her brother—"

The lock-keeper gave the customs officer a warning look, which Maigret intercepted.

"Ah, she has a brother," he remarked.

"The Inspector's bound to hear of it sooner or later," the man remarked. Clearly the 'laced' coffee he was drinking was not his first of the day by any means. "Her brother did eight years' hard. Got soused one night at Honfleur. There was a whole crowd of 'em painting the town red. The police tried to stop it and he laid a policeman out. The poor chap died next month."

"A sailor, is he?"

"He served on deep-sea craft before he came back to these parts. Now he's on a coasting-schooner, the *Saint Michel* of Paimpol."

Captain Delcourt, who had been showing signs of impatience, rose to his feet.

"Come along! Time to be off."

"What's the hurry? Steamer's not in the lock yet," grumbled the customs officer, who seemed disinclined to move.

Only two of the group remained. Maigret beckoned to the waitress, who came back with the bottle.

"Does the *Saint Michel* often call here?"

"Now and then."

"Was she here on the sixteenth of September?"

The customs officer hesitated, then, turning to the man beside him, said:

"Well, he could have found it out from the lock register anyhow, couldn't he? . . . Yes, she was here. As a matter of fact, they had to stay in the outer harbour all night because of the fog, and didn't sail till daybreak."

"Know where they sailed for?"

"Southampton. I checked their papers. They'd loaded millstone grit at Caen."

"And Julie's brother hasn't been seen in this part of the world since then, I take it?"

This time the customs officer drew a deep breath, pondered, and drained his glass before replying.

"Better ask that of the folk who say they saw him around yesterday. Can't say I saw him, myself."

"Yesterday?"

The man made an evasive gesture. A steamer was gliding past between the stone walls of the lock, its black bulk

towering above the countryside, its funnel higher than the trees fringing the canal.

"Must be going."

"So must I."

Maigret beckoned to the waitress.

"How much?"

"Oh, you're sure to be coming here again. I'll chalk it up."

When Maigret left the café there were still some people hanging about, waiting for something to happen, outside the Captain's cottage. When they caught sight of the Inspector they pretended to be gazing at the English ship passing through the lock. Just then a man came striding down from the village. The Inspector judged him to be the mayor, of whom he had had a glimpse the night before.

A man between forty-five and fifty, very tall, pink-cheeked, inclined to stoutness. He wore grey shooting-kit and gaiters. Maigret went towards him.

"Monsieur Grandmaison? I am Inspector Maigret of the *Police Judiciaire*."

"Pleased to meet you." The tone was noticeably off-hand.

The mayor stared at the café, then at Maigret, then back at the café. It was easy to guess what he was thinking. "Queer that a big man in the Paris police should keep such low company!"

They continued walking towards the lock, which lay between them and the cottage.

"I hear Joris is dead."

"That's so," said Maigret curtly. He did not much like the mayor's attitude.

Yet it was quite in keeping. The attitude of the bigwig of a small country town who deems himself the centre of

the universe, affects the dress of a country squire, and pays tribute to democracy by shaking hands with all and sundry, greeting the country folk with casual *bonhomie* and, on occasion, patting their children on the head.

"Think you'll catch the murderer? After all, it was you who brought Joris back, and—. Excuse me."

He went up to the water-bailiff, who evidently acted as his gillie on his shooting expeditions, for he said:

"All the wattles on the right of the pit need straightening. And one of the decoys is no use whatever; this morning he seemed more dead than alive."

"Very good, sir."

Before rejoining Maigret the mayor took the opportunity of shaking hands with the harbour-master.

"Good morning, Captain."

"Good morning, Mayor."

"What were we taking about? Oh yes. . . . Is there any truth in all this talk about a wound in Joris's head that had been sewn up, and his having gone mad, and all the rest of it?"

"Was Captain Joris a friend of yours?"

"Joris was in my employ for twenty-eight years. I thought highly of him. He was conscientious in his work."

"Honest?"

"Almost all my men are honest."

"What was his pay?"

"Well, it varied—on account of the war, you know, which upset shipping conditions. Still, he made enough to buy that cottage of his. And I should say he'd twenty thousand francs or so put away in the bank."

"No more?"

"I doubt it. Say five thousand more, at most."

The upper lock-gate was opening, and the steamer about

to move into the canal. Another ship, coming from Caen, was waiting to take its place and put out to sea.

It was a calm, fine morning. People on the road followed the two men with their eyes. From the deck of the steamer, English sailors glanced down now and then at the crowd, as they went about their duties.

"What's your idea, Mayor, of Julie Legrand?"

"A little fool. Joris treated her far too well and she's had her head turned. She fancies herself—how shall I put it?—she fancies herself above her station."

"And her brother?"

"Never met the man. But by all accounts he's a blackguard."

They were near Joris's gate. Children were still hanging round it, playing—waiting for something exciting to happen.

"What was the cause of his death?"

"Strychnine poisoning."

Maigret was wearing his surliest look, walking slowly, his hands thrust deep in his overcoat pockets, his pipe between his teeth. The pipe seemed made to match his massive face; it took the best part of a quarter of an ounce of tobacco.

The white cat was still lying on the wall, basking in the sun. It took to its heels as the two men came up.

"Aren't you coming in?" The mayor was surprised to see Maigret halt at the gate for no apparent reason.

"Just a moment. Do you think Julie was the Captain's mistress?"

"How the devil should I know?" There was a note of peevishness in Monsieur Grandmaison's voice.

"Did you visit his house often?"

"Never set foot in it. Joris had been one of my employees. And that being so . . ." A would-be aristocratic smile filled out the pause.

"If you don't mind," the mayor continued, "we'll get it over as quickly as possible. I have people coming for lunch."

"Are you married?"

His hand still on the gate-latch, an obstinate look on his face, Maigret stuck to the idea that was running in his head.

Monsieur Grandmaison drew himself up to his full height, all but six feet, and glared down at him. The Inspector noted that, though the mayor did not actually squint, there was a slight asymmetry in his eyes.

"Let me tell you, Inspector, if you continue speaking to me in that tone you'll have reason to regret it. . . . Now then, show me whatever you have to show."

He opened the gate himself and walked up to the door. The constable on duty on the threshold stood back deferentially.

The kitchen door had glass panels. Something struck Maigret at once: the two women were there all right—but where was Julie?

"She's gone up to her room, sir, and shut herself in. We couldn't get her to come down again."

"Any special reason for her going up like that?"

The lighthouse-keeper's wife explained.

"She was feeling better. Still crying a bit, but not so hard, and starting to chat with us. 'Have something to eat, Julie,' says I, and off she goes to the cupboard. . . ."

"Yes? And then?"

"I couldn't make it out. She seemed all in a flutter, and rushed out like a mad thing. Then we heard her slam her door to, and turn the key."

The cupboard contained only kitchen utensils, a basket of apples, some soused herrings on a dish, and two dirty plates, the streaks of grease on which suggested there had been cold meat on them.

"May I venture to suggest, Inspector," said the mayor with laboured politeness, "that we make a start? It's half-past eleven. I hardly think that the doings of that young woman . . ."

Maigret locked the cupboard, pocketed the key, and strode heavily towards the staircase.

Chapter III

THE STORE-CUPBOARD

"OPEN the door, Julie."

No answer. Only the sound of a body slumping on to the bed.

"Open the door."

Silence. Maigret lunged against the door with his shoulder. The screws holding the lock gave way.

"Why wouldn't you let me in?"

She was not crying. She made no movement. Huddled up on the bed, she was staring straight in front of her, steady-eyed. Only when the Inspector was dangerously near did she make a move. Jumping off the bed, she ran towards the door.

"Leave me alone!" she panted.

"Then—give me the letter, Julie."

"What letter?"

She took a combative tone, hoping to brazen out her lie.

"Did the Captain allow your brother to come and see you here?"

No answer.

"I see. He forbade it. But your brother came all the same. In fact, he paid you a visit, I understand, the night that Joris disappeared."

A hard, almost murderous glance.

"The *Saint Michel*," Maigret continued calmly, "was in harbour. Quite natural he should look you up. Just one question, by the way. When he comes, you give him something to eat, don't you?"

"You beast!" she muttered under her breath.

"He came here while you were in Paris. As you were away, he left a note for you. To make sure that you and no one else would find it, he put it in the store-cupboard. Give me the note."

"I've thrown it away."

Maigret glanced at the empty grate, the closed window.

"Hand it over, Julie."

She stiffened up, not like a woman at bay, but like a child in a temper. So much so that the Inspector couldn't help murmuring in an almost elder-brotherly tone:

"You silly kid!"

The note had merely been slipped under the pillow of the bed where she was lying. But even now she would not give in. She flung herself on the Inspector, tried to wrest the letter from his hand. Her childish rage amused him.

Prisoning her wrists, he said gruffly, "That's enough of it," and proceeded to read the ill-written, mis-spelt missive.

If you come back with your genleman look arter him well as theres some bad lots got a downe on him. Ile be back in 2 or 3 days with the ship. Dont look for the cutletts as Ive eten them. Yr loving brother.

Maigret stared at the floor, so puzzled that he seemed to have forgotten Julie's presence. . . .

A quarter of an hour later he was in the harbour-master's office. Delcourt informed him that the *Saint Michel* was reported in at Fécamp and, if the nor'wester held, should reach Ouistreham next evening.

"So you know the exact position of all the ships in these waters?" Maigret's eyes roved thoughtfully the shimmering expanse of sea, from which rose far out a single plume of smoke.

"Yes, we're in touch all along the coast. Look! That's the list of ships due in today." He pointed to a blackboard on the wall, with names chalked on it. "Had any luck in your enquiry? By the way, take everything folk tell you with a grain of salt. Even quite worthy folk. You'd never believe the amount of backbiting that goes on in this place." Del-court waved to the skipper of a cargo-boat that was moving across the harbour, gazed at the *Sailors' Rest*, and sighed. "That's how they are, worse luck!"

At three o'clock the Prosecutor and his colleagues had finished their inspection and, under the thrilled gaze of the little knot of people outside Joris's gate, filed out to the four cars awaiting them on the road.

"Lots of duck round here, I suppose?" a high official remarked to Monsieur Grandmaison, after a glance across the fens.

"It's been a poor season. But last year . . ."

Monsieur Grandmaison broke off and hurried to the leading car, which was just beginning to move.

"You'll drop in at my place for a moment, I hope. My wife's expecting you."

Maigret had kept in the background. Now, with the bare minimum of affability, the mayor addressed him.

"Step in, Inspector. We hope you'll join us—needless to say."

Only Julie and the two women were left in the cottage. The constable stood at the doorway, on watch for the motor hearse that was coming to take the body to Caen.

In the four cars a mood of cheerfulness prevailed—like that on the way back from a funeral when the mourners are boon companions and glad to have got it over. The mayor chatted to the Deputy Prosecutor, while Maigret sat uncomfortably on the flap-seat.

"If I had my own way, I'd live here all the year round. Unfortunately my wife doesn't care much for the country. The result is, we're mostly at our house in Caen. . . . My wife's just back from Juan-les-Pins, where she's been staying with the children."

"How old is he now, your son?"

"Fifteen."

The lock-keepers watched the car go past. Soon the mayor's country house came into view, an enlarged edition of a Norman cottage, its grounds surrounded by white palings and studded with terracotta animals.

Madame Grandmaison, in a dark silk dress, welcomed each guest with a discreetly modulated smile—quite the accomplished hostess. The drawing-room door stood open. On a table in the smoking-room stood an array of liqueurs, boxes of cigars.

All these people, Maigret noticed, knew each other well. They evidently belonged to the same set at Caen. A white-aproned maid took the men's coats and hats.

"So you'd never been to Ouistreham before, Judge, though you've been living all these years in Caen?"

"Twelve years, madame, to be precise. . . . Ah, there's Mademoiselle Gisèle."

A girl of fourteen, but older than her years in bearing—she had all her mother's poise—had come in, and was shaking hands with the guests. . . . Meanwhile no one had thought fit to introduce Maigret to the lady of the house.

"I expect that after what you've just been looking at you'd prefer something stronger than a cup of tea. Yes? A glass of liqueur brandy. . . . Is your wife still at Fontainebleau?"

People were talking on all sides of him. Maigret heard snatches of their conversation.

"No, ten duck in a night is a very good bag indeed. . . .

One doesn't feel the cold, I assure you. Anyhow, I keep a fire going in my shooting-pit."

Another voice: "I suppose the shipping slump has hit people rather hard."

"Well, that depends. Here we hardly notice it; none of our vessels are laid up. Of course small shipowners, especially those with only coasting-schooners, are beginning to feel the pinch. In fact, most of the people who own schooners are trying to get rid of them; they don't cover expenses."

"No, madame"—it was the Deputy Prosecutor speaking, just beside Maigret. "There's no reason to feel alarmed. The mystery, if there is a mystery, about the man's death will soon be cleared up. Isn't that so, Inspector? What? Haven't you been introduced? Allow me. . . . This is Inspector Maigret, one of the leading lights of our *Police Judiciaire*."

Maigret was at his most unbending, his expression as little amiable as might be. He cast a curious glance at his hostess's young daughter as she proffered him smilingly a plate of fancy cakes.

"No, thanks."

"Really? Don't you like sweet things?"

A voice said: "Here's luck!"

"Here's the best to our charming hostess!"

The Public Prosecutor, a tall, lean man in the early fifties, who in spite of thick-lensed glasses saw with extreme difficulty, drew Maigret aside.

"Needless to say, I give you a free hand. Only please ring me up daily to keep me posted. What's your theory of the crime? A woman at the bottom of it, eh?" Just then Monsieur Grandmaison approached, and he went on in a louder tone: "Anyhow, you're in luck having a mayor to deal with like our friend here. He'll do all he can to help

you. . . . Isn't that so, Grandmaison? I was just telling the Inspector . . ."

"If he likes to stay with me, we'll be very glad to have him here. . . . I suppose you're putting up at the hotel, Inspector?"

"Yes. Thanks for your invitation, but the hotel's much handier for the harbour."

"Do you really think you'll pick up any useful information at that pub? Let me put you on your guard, Inspector. You don't know Ouistreham. Those fellows who spend all their time soaking at the pub are apt to let their imaginations run away with them. For the sake of a good yarn they'd accuse their fathers and mothers of any crime!"

"Suppose we talk of something else?" Madame Grandmaison put in with an amiable smile. "Do have a cake, Inspector. No? You haven't a sweet tooth?"

Twice running! Damn these women! By way of protest, Maigret all but fished his huge pipe out of his pocket.

"I'm afraid I must be off. Must get on with my enquiry," he said rather ponderously.

They made no effort to detain him; it was obvious that they no more desired his presence than he desired to stay.

Once outside, he filled his pipe and walked slowly down to the harbour. He was already a familiar figure. Everyone knew that he had stood a round of drinks at the café, and hailed him with a certain friendliness.

From the quayside he saw the car conveying Joris's body to Caen receding in the distance, and had a glimpse of Julie at one of the ground-floor windows; the other women were trying to coax her back into the kitchen.

A group had gathered round a fishing-smack that had just come in, and were watching the crew sort out their catch. The customs officers were lounging on the bridge, whiling

away the time till the next ship came in. The harbour-master accosted Maigret.

"I've just had confirmation of the news about the *Saint Michel*; she'll be in tomorrow. She's been three days in dock at Fécamp, it seems, having her bowsprit repaired."

"Tell me, does she ever have dried cod-roe amongst her cargo?"

"Cod-roe? No. It's shipped from Norway in small freighters or Norwegian steamers. But Caen isn't one of their ports of call. They go straight to the sardine ports, Concarneau, Sables d'Olonne, Saint-Jean-de-Luz, and so on."

"And seal-oil?"

The Captain looked much surprised.

"On the *Saint Michel*? Why on earth—?"

"Just an idea."

"No. These coasters almost always carry the same cargoes: vegetables, especially onions, for England, coal for the Breton ports, stone, cement, slates, and that sort of thing. . . . By the way, I've been asking the men at the lock about the *Saint Michel's* last call. She came in from Caen at the tail of the tide. The staff were going off duty. Joris pointed out that the water was too low; it wouldn't be safe to put out to sea in thick weather like that. But the skipper insisted on being let through the lock, so as to be ready to sail the first thing in the morning. They spent the night moored in the outer port. At low tide they took the ground and they didn't move till about nine."

"Was Julie's brother on board?"

"Must have been. There's only three of them: the skipper, who owns the boat, and his two men. Big Louis . . ."

"The ex-convict?"

"Yes. He's called 'Big Louis' as he's a great hefty fellow; he could strangle you with one hand!"

"A tough customer, eh?"

"If you asked the mayor or any of the local bigwigs they'd say Yes. Personally, I never met the man before he went to jail. And he isn't often here. All I know is that he's never given us any trouble at Ouistreham. He drinks, of course. But you can never tell with him. Always sort of half-seas-over, if you see what I mean. He just mooches about the harbour—I suppose it's that queer lopsided walk of his that puts some folk off. A rum customer! Still, the skipper of the *Saint Michel* swears by him."

"He came here while his sister was in Paris, didn't he?"

No answer. Delcourt merely looked blank. And Maigret realized at that moment that he'd never get at the whole story; that sea-going folk hung together, weren't going to give one another away.

"After all, he's not the only one."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing much. . . . Only I heard talk of a stranger who'd been seen prowling about. Just gossip."

"Who saw him?"

"Afraid I don't remember. You know the way folk talk. . . . What about a drink?"

For the second time Maigret entered the café; this time hands were stretched towards him.

"Those blokes from Caen made a quick job of it, I hear."

"What's yours?"

"A glass of beer, thanks."

There had been bright sunshine all day. Now the light was paling; strands of mist were creeping lazily between the trees, steam rising from the canal.

"Looks like another thick night," the captain sighed.

Just then there came a distant hooting.

"That's the light-buoy at the entrance of the fairway."

Maigret asked point-blank :

"Did Captain Joris often go to Norway ?"

"Yes, when he was in the Anglo-Norman. Especially just after the war, when we were so short of wood. Nasty cargo, timber ; leaves no room to work a ship."

"Did you work for the same company ?"

"Only for a while. I mostly served with Worms & Co., of Bordeaux. 'On the ding-dong' as we used to call it—always the same run, Bordeaux to Nantes and back again. Eighteen years of it I had !"

"Any idea who Julie's parents were ?"

"Fisher-folk. She was born at Port-en-Bessin. Fisher-folk in a manner of speaking—her father never did a stroke of work if he could help it. He died in the war. I expect her mother's still selling fish in the street, when she isn't putting down red wine in the pubs."

For the second time, thinking of Julie, Maigret smiled to himself. He remembered her appearance in his Paris office, in a neat blue tailor-made costume, quite the prim young lady. Then the scene that very morning when she had struggled with him, like a child in a tantrum, to prevent him reading her brother's letter.

Joris's cottage was already almost blotted out by the rising mist. There was no light in the bedroom from which the corpse had been removed, or in the dining-room. Only the hall-lamp could be seen, though doubtless the lights were on in the kitchen, where the two neighbours were keeping Julie company.

Some lock-hands entered the café ; discreetly they selected a table at the far end for their game of dominoes. The lighthouse lit up.

"The same again." The captain pointed to the empty glasses. "My shout."

In a curiously muffled voice Maigret enquired :

"If Joris were alive, where would he be at this precise moment ? Here ?"

"No. At home. In slippers, in front of the fire."

"In which room, do you think ?"

"In the kitchen. Reading his paper. After that, he'd settle down to a book on gardening—his latest fad. He was crazy about flowers. You've only got to look at his garden—full of 'em, though it's late in the year for flowers."

The others grinned, secretly a little ashamed of themselves for not being "crazy about flowers" and preferring to spend their leisure in a pub.

"He never went shooting ?"

"Very seldom. Only when someone asked him to join in a shoot."

"The mayor, for instance ?"

"Yes; when the duck were in, they sometimes went together to the mayor's shooting-pit in the fens."

The café was badly lighted and it was difficult to see the domino-players across the haze of smoke. A big stove made the atmosphere still more oppressive. Outside was twilight —a wintry dusk to which the fog added a special, rather eerie gloom. The foghorn was still baying. Maigret's pipe sizzled.

Leaning back in his chair, he half closed his eyes, trying to piece together the scraps of information he had amassed so far. "Joris disappeared for six weeks, then came back with his skull split and sewn up." He was unaware that he had said it aloud. "And no sooner was he home than he was poisoned.

"It was only the next day that Julie found the note left in the cupboard by her brother." Maigret heaved a deep sigh before summing up.

"It comes to this. There was an attempt to kill him.

Then he was carefully patched up again. Then he was killed outright. Unless . . ." For the three facts didn't hang together. And a possible explanation had suggested itself, possible but so grotesque that it took his breath away. "Suppose, the first time, it wasn't an attempt to kill him; only to deprive him of his reason?"

Hadn't the Paris doctors said that the operation must have been performed by an extremely skilful surgeon? But, to deprive a man of his reason, would one have to split his skull? And, in any case, what proof was there that Joris's mind was permanently affected?

Keeping respectful silence, the others were gazing at the Inspector. Without speaking, the customs officer signalled to the waitress: "Another round of drinks, please."

In the stuffy room everyone was darkly brooding, lost in thoughts that drink had slightly fuddled.

Three cars passed on the road outside: the officials from Caen returning from the Grandmaisons' reception. . . . By this time Captain Joris's body was lying in cold storage at the Medico-Legal Institute.

There was no sound but the click of dominoes on the deal table at the far end of the room. Gradually, it seemed, the mystery of Joris's death was being brought home to the minds of all present. It weighed on them like something almost palpable that had materialized from the smoke-bound air. Faces grew glum; the junior customs officer was so perturbed that he rose, saying nervously:

"I'd better be going. My wife's expecting me."

Maigret handed his tobacco-pouch to the man next him, who passed it on. Then a voice was heard, Delcourt's.

He too was getting up; he had had enough of the atmosphere of gloom that had settled on the room.

"How much, Marthe?"

"Two rounds? Nine francs seventy-five. And three ten from yesterday."

There was a general move. As the men filed out, damp air poured in by the open door.

Each went homewards in his own direction. Across the baying of the foghorn footsteps rang, receding.

For a while Maigret stood listening to the footfalls scattering in all directions: heavy steps, sometimes slowing down abruptly, sometimes flurried. And he realized that, though one couldn't say how it had come about, fear had taken hold of them.

All those men making for their homes were frightened of something, some vague peril threatening each and all, some unforeseeable disaster; afraid of the dark, afraid of the lights. . . . Thinking, perhaps: "Whose turn next?"

Maigret knocked out his pipe and buttoned up his overcoat.

Chapter IV

THE SCHOONER

"THAT all right, sir?" the hotel-keeper enquired anxiously as each course was served.

"Quite all right." As a matter of fact, Maigret hardly knew what he was eating.

He had the big hotel dining-room—made to hold forty or fifty guests—to himself. It was a hotel for summer visitors, furnished like all seaside hotels, flowers in vases on every table.

This, the holiday-makers' Ouistreham, had no truck with the Ouistreham that interested the Inspector and which, to his great satisfaction, he was beginning to understand. What he always disliked in an enquiry was its start, the first contacts, the preliminary fumblings and false impressions.

This town of Ouistreham, for instance. In Paris he had pictured it, quite wrongly, as a seaport in the style of St. Malo. Then, on the night of his arrival, he had judged it a thoroughly depressing place, inhabited by surly, uncommunicative people.

Now he was on easy terms with it, felt positively at home here. Ouistreham was just an ordinary village at the end of a short road lined by stunted trees. The only part of it that mattered was the harbour: a lock, a lighthouse, Joris's cottage, the *Sailors' Rest*.

And, also, what might be called the 'rhythm' of the port—two tides every twenty-four hours, which timed the movements of the little group of men concerned with the

canal-lock, and of the fishermen he had watched passing with their baskets.

Certain words, too, had acquired for him a clearer meaning: harbour-master, coaster, cargo-boat. Using eyes and ears to good effect, he had learnt the rules of the game.

Still, the problem which had brought him here hadn't been solved. Indeed, he was as far from a solution as ever. However, he had done the preliminary spadework; got a hang of the people involved, their mode of living, their daily routine. So far, so good. . . .

"Will you be staying long?" The hotel-keeper had himself brought Maigret's coffee.

"Can't say."

"Lucky this didn't happen in the season. It would have done us no end of harm."

Maigret knew by now that there were four distinct Ouistrehams: Port Ouistreham, the village of Ouistreham, residential Ouistreham (with a few private houses like the mayor's along the main road), and lastly Ouistreham-on-Sea, at present out of action.

"Are you going out, sir?"

"Yes. I'll have a stroll before turning in."

The tide was near the full. The weather had turned much colder, and the fog, dense as ever, was forming into drops of icy water.

Everything was in darkness. All the houses were closed and shuttered. Nothing could be seen but the glow of the lighthouse, blurred like a tear-dimmed eye. But from the lock came sounds of people talking.

A short blast of a steamer's whistle. A green light and a red showed up; a dark bulk loomed above the lock wall. Maigret knew enough by now to guess what was happening down there. A steamer was coming in. A shadowy form

was picking up the mooring-rope, making it fast to the nearest bollard. Presently, from the bridge, the captain would shout an order to go astern, to take his way off.

Delcourt came up; he gazed anxiously towards the jetty.

"What is it?"

"Can't make out." He screwed up his eyes as if by an effort of will he could make them pierce the inky darkness of the foreshore. Two men were beginning to close the lock-gates. He shouted to them: "Hold on a minute!" Then suddenly exclaimed: "Yes, it's he!"

At the same moment, less than fifty yards away, someone bawled:

"Ahoy, Louis! Down jib and stand by to come alongside, port side to."

The voice came from below, from the pool of darkness where the jetties lay. A speck of light approached. Then came sounds of someone walking on a deck, of canvas falling with a rattle of rings along the forestay.

A mainsail glided by, so close they could have touched it.

"How the devil did they manage it?" Delcourt exclaimed in a puzzled tone. Then, turning towards the schooner, he shouted:

"Carry on! Shove her nose in under the port quarter of the steamer or you'll foul the gates."

A man with a hawser had sprung ashore, and now, his arms akimbo, was gazing round him.

"Is that the *Saint Michel*?" Maigret asked.

"Yes. She must have travelled like a racing-yacht."

A hurricane-lamp on the deck beneath cast a wavering light on a pile of ropes, a cask, the form of a man who suddenly let go the tiller and ran to the schooner's bows.

The lock-hands came up one by one and fell to gazing at the schooner with unwonted interest.

"Get back to the gates, boys!" Delcourt called to them. "Man the winches!"

Once the lock-gates closed, water poured in through the sluices and the schooner began to rise. The gleam of light drew nearer. Soon the deck of the *Saint Michel* was almost level with the quay. The man on board hailed Delcourt.

"Evening, Captain!"

"Good evening." Delcourt sounded ill at ease. "You made a record run."

"Aye; we had the wind behind us, and Louis set every stitch of sail. We overhauled a steamer on the way."

"Going to Caen?"

"Aye, I unload there. What's the news, this end?"

He was two yards from Maigret, "Big Louis" only a trifle farther off. But they could barely see each other. Only the skipper and the harbour-master did the talking. Delcourt, puzzled what to answer, turned to Maigret.

"Is it true that Joris has come back?" the skipper asked. "There was something in the papers about it, I heard."

"He came back and he's gone again."

"Eh? What's that?"

Louis had moved a step nearer, his hands in his pockets, one shoulder higher than the other. In the darkness he gave the impression of a big, rather loosely built fellow, with nothing distinctive except his slouch.

"He's dead."

Louis had come so close to Delcourt that he could have touched him.

"What's that? Dead?" he growled.

It was the first time Maigret had heard his voice. A husky, drawling voice; an intonation slovenly as the man's way of holding himself. It was still impossible to make out his face.

"He was poisoned the night he got back." And meaningly, Delcourt made haste to add: "This gentleman is the Inspector of Police who's holding the enquiry."

A load off his mind. For some minutes he had been wondering how to break the news. Was he afraid the crew of the *Saint Michel* might give themselves away?

"Ah, you're in the police, sir?" the skipper muttered.

The schooner was still rising. The skipper swung himself over the bulwarks on to the quay, but hesitated before holding out his hand to Maigret.

"A rum go!" he exclaimed, his mind still on Joris.

He too seemed ill at ease; even more so than Delcourt. Louis's tall form swayed in the darkness, his head cocked on one side. He grunted some words that Maigret failed to catch.

"What did he say?"

"He said in *patois*: 'Dirty work!'"

"What was dirty work?" Maigret asked the ex-convict.

But the man merely stared at him. They were near enough now to see each other's faces. Louis's was puffy and one cheek seemed larger than the other—or perhaps it was his trick of keeping his head on one side that made it seem so. Big shallow eyes, coarse features. An unprepossessing face.

"You were here yesterday," the Inspector said to him.

The water in the lock had found its level and the upper gates were opening. The steamer was already entering the canal, and Delcourt had to run to ascertain her tonnage and last port. Someone shouted from the bridge: "Nine hundred tons. Rouen."

The *Saint Michel*, however, stayed in the lock. The men standing by to handle her seemed conscious of something unusual in the air and waited, each at his post, pricking up his ears.

Delcourt was jotting down in his notebook the information given as he walked back.

"Well?" asked Maigret impatiently.

"Well—what?" Louis rumbled. "You said I was here yesterday. I was."

It was hard to follow what the man said; he had a way of speaking with his lips closed, and mumbling as if his mouth were full. Added to this, a broad North-Breton accent.

"Why did you come here:"

"To see my sister."

"And as she was away you left a note for her."

Meanwhile, from a corner of his eye, Maigret was taking stock of the owner of the schooner. He was dressed exactly like his men and looked more like a rather superior boatswain than the skipper of a coaster.

"We stopped three days at Fécamp," he now put in. "So Louis took the opportunity of going to see the girl."

The men posted round the lock were keeping quite still, all eagerness not to miss a word. The foghorn was still blaring. The fog had thickened into a drizzle and the cobbles underfoot gleamed darkly.

A hatchway opened in the schooner's deck, a head peeped out. Tousled hair, a bushy beard.

"What's up? Why ain't we moving?"

"Shut your trap, Célestin," growled the skipper.

Delcourt was stumping up and down the quay to keep himself warm; also perhaps to keep himself in countenance. He was doubtful whether to move off or stay.

"Tell me, Louis. What made you think that Joris was in danger?"

Louis shrugged his shoulders.

"Eh, man, wouldn't any fool a tumbled to it? Seein' as summun had had a go at him already."

He spoke so thickly that one almost needed an interpreter to explain what he was saying.

All were conscious of a feeling of extreme discomfort, an ominous suspense. Louis turned and gazed in the direction of Joris's cottage, but nothing could be seen there, not even a patch of blacker darkness in the gloom.

"Ain't Julie there?" he asked.

"Yes. Are you going to see her?"

He shook his head. A clumsy, bearish gesture.

"Why not?"

"She'll be blubbin', for sure."

He pronounced it "bloobin'"—and in a tone of venomous disgust, the tone of one who cannot stomach the sight of tears.

Their clothes were sopping. The drizzle was increasing. Delcourt suggested:

"How about going over there for a drink?"

One of his men spoke up from the darkness.

"They've just closed."

The skipper of the *Saint Michel* said:

"If you gentlemen don't mind coming down to the cabin . . ."

A quartette: Maigret, Delcourt, Louis, and the skipper, whose name was Lannec. The cabin was a mere cubby-hole. A small stove gave off an intense heat. The room was filled with a warm, damp haze through which the flame of an oil-lamp hung on gimbals glowed murky red.

Varnished pitchpine walls. An oak table, so gashed and battered that there was not an inch of level surface left. Some dirty plates; thick grease-smeared glasses; a half-bottle of red wine.

On either side a recess, like a cupboard without a door, let into the wall. In each was a bed: the skipper's and that of

Louis, his mate. Draggled beds with seaboots and clothing lying on them. A reek of tar, spirits, food, and an unventilated bedroom—but, above all, the curious, undefinable smell peculiar to ships.

Seen by lamplight, the men looked less sinister. Lannec had a brown moustache and bright shrewd eyes. He had taken a bottle of spirits from a locker and was rinsing out the glasses, emptying them on the floor.

"So you were here on the night of September 16?"

Louis was resting his elbows on the table, his back hunched. Lannec answered, as he handed round the bottle.

"Aye, we were here."

"It's unusual, isn't it, for you to stay the night in the outer harbour, where you have to watch your moorings on account of the tide?"

"We do it sometimes," said Lannec calmly.

"It often saves a few hours in the morning," Delcourt explained. He seemed bent on playing the part of mediator.

"Did Captain Joris come to see you on board?"

"While we were in the lock, yes. Not afterwards."

"And you didn't see or hear anything unusual?"

"Good health, sir! . . . No, nothing."

"You, Louis—did you go to bed?"

"Expect so."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, I s'pose I did. It's so long ago."

"Didn't you go to see your sister?"

"May have done. Not for long, anyhow."

"Hadn't Joris forbidden you to set foot in his house?"

"That's all my eye!"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. It's all just bloody nonsense. . . . Well, ain't you done with me?"

There really was no case against the man. And, anyhow, Maigret had not the least wish to arrest him at this stage.

"For the present, yes," he replied.

Louis said some words in Breton to his skipper, rose, drank off his glass, touched his cap.

"What did he say to you?" Maigret asked.

"That I won't need him on the run to Caen and back. He'll meet me here when I've unloaded our cargo."

"Where's he going now?"

"He didn't say."

Delcourt rose hastily, put his head through the hatchway, listened a few minutes, then stepped down again.

"He's on board the dredger."

"The dredger?"

"Didn't you notice the two dredgers moored in the canal? They're not in use just now. Sailors would rather sleep on an old boat than go to a hotel."

"Have another!" Lannec held out the bottle.

Maigret took a quick look round him, screwing up his eyes, then sank back into his chair.

"Tell me. What was the first place you called at after leaving Ouistreham on the sixteenth of last month?"

"Southampton. We were carrying stone."

"Next?"

"Boulogne."

"You didn't go to Norway after that?"

"Only been there once, six years ago."

"Did you know Joris well?"

"Well? Like we know everyone from La Rochelle to Rotterdam, if you see what I mean. Here's the best! This Hollands you're drinking, I brought it back from Rotterdam. Like a cigar?" He took a box from a drawer. "These cigars cost ten cents over there. Only a franc. Good value!"

Fat, well-rolled cigars with gold bands.

"Well, I just can't make it out," sighed Maigret. "I've been assured that Joris went to see you when you were in the outer port—and he had someone with him."

Lannec was busy cutting the tip of a cigar. When he looked up his face was expressionless.

"I've nothing to hide. I'd have told you if he had."

A thud on the deck above. Someone had jumped on to it. A head appeared in the hatchway. "Havre boat sighted."

Delcourt sprang up.

"I must get the lock clear for her. The *Saint Michel* will have to move now."

Lannec turned to the Inspector.

"Anything against my moving on?"

"To Caen?"

"Yes. The canal don't go no farther. I reckon we'll have got our cargo off by tomorrow evening."

All these men had sounded perfectly straightforward, they had an honest air. Yet somehow everything they said rang false. But in so subtle a way that Maigret would have been hard put to it to say what gave him this impression, or where the lies began. Decent fellows, to all appearance. Lannec no less than Delcourt, or Joris, or all the men who forgathered at the *Sailors' Rest*. Even Big Louis, scoundrel though he looked, had something likable about him. . . .

"I'll let go for you, Lannec. Don't move." The harbourmaster went up the ladder and cast off the hawser from the bollard.

The old man who had bobbed up from the fo'c'sle shambled across the deck, grumbling: "Blast that Louis! Always clearing off when he's wanted!" After setting the jib and flying jib, he shoved the schooner off with a boat-hook.

Maigret jumped on shore at the last moment. The fog

had definitely turned to rain and he now could see the harbour lights, men moving to and fro, and the Havre steamer, which was whistling impatiently outside the lock.

Winches clanked; water began flowing through the sluices. The schooner's mainsail blocked the view up the canal.

Maigret went on to the lock-bridge; thence he had a glimpse of two dredgers—monstrous contraptions, their complicated upper works all caked with rust—made fast to the bank. He picked his way towards them; the ground was littered with rubbish of all sorts: rusty cables, anchors, scrap-iron. Crossing by a plank that served as gangway, he noticed a light showing through a chink.

"Louis!" he called.

The light went out at once. Louis's head and shoulders emerged from a hatch, the lid of which had been removed.

"Whatcher want?" he snarled.

Just then something moved beneath him, in the belly of the dredger. Someone was groping about in the darkness below. There was a muffled clang, as if he had stumbled against a steel plate.

"Who's on board with you?"

"Dunno!"

Maigret started moving forward, tripped and nearly fell into the bilge, where mud lay three feet deep. He could still hear someone creeping gingerly about, but the sounds now came from the far end of the ship. And after bumping his head against a bucket he realized that the way there might be strewn with pitfalls; this type of craft was a complete mystery to him.

"So you refuse to speak?"

The answer was a grunting noise, which seemed to convey: "Dunno whatcher talking about!"

To search the two dredgers thoroughly on a pitch-dark

night like this would require ten men at least—and men familiar with them at that. Hopeless! Maigret retreated along the gang-plank. Voices were carrying well because of the rain, and he heard someone saying at the lock:

"It lay right across the fairway."

Walking on, he found the man who had spoken, the second officer on the Havre steamer, pointing out something to Delcourt. The harbour-master seemed badly flustered at seeing Maigret there.

"I don't see how they could have lost it without noticing," the second officer went on.

"Lost what?" Maigret asked.

"The boat."

"What boat?"

"This one. We ran into it just now, between the jetties. It belongs to the schooner ahead of us. The name's on the stern: *Saint Michel.*"

"Must have worked loose somehow," Delcourt suggested in a casual tone. "That often happens."

"No, it can't have worked loose, for the simple reason that, with the weather as it is, the schooner can't have had the boat in tow, but on deck."

Once again there was a tension in the air: all the lock-hands at their posts listening with all their ears.

"I'll attend to it tomorrow. Leave the boat here." Turning to Maigret, Delcourt added with a rather forced smile: "Curious job, a harbour-master's, isn't it? Always something cropping up."

The Inspector, however, did not smile, and his tone was grave as he said:

"Listen! If you don't see me tomorrow morning at seven—well, let's say eight—please ring up the Public Prosecutor at Caen."

"What on earth . . . ?"

"Good night. And see that boat stays here, please."

To throw dust in their eyes, he started walking along the jetty, his hands in his pockets, the collar of his coat turned up. Waves were crashing against the breakwaters; the breeze was strongly charged with ozone.

Near the end of the jetty he stooped and picked something up.

CHAPTER V

NOTRE-DAME DES DUNES

AT sunrise Maigret returned to the *Hôtel de l'Univers*. His overcoat was soaked through, his throat parched by a night's incessant smoking. At the hotel no one seemed to be up. In the kitchen, however, he discovered the hotel-keeper, lighting the fire.

"So you stayed out all night?"

"Yes. Would you bring some coffee to my room as soon as possible? Any chance of a bath?"

"I'll have to light the furnace."

"Don't bother."

A grey morning. The inevitable fog—but a paler, lighter fog than usual. Maigret's eyes smarted, his head felt like a hollow block of wood. He opened the window and sat in front of it, waiting for his coffee.

A curious night it had been. He'd done nothing sensational, made no startling discovery. Yet he'd come a step nearer understanding the problem. Several new facts had swelled the total of his knowledge.

The coming of the *Saint Michel* and Lannec's behaviour. Suspicious? No, that wasn't the word. Shifty. Lacking frankness. Delcourt, too, seemed to be keeping something back at times. So did they all, for that matter, every man-jack of them!

Louis's attitude, on the other hand, was definitely suspicious. He had not gone with the schooner to Caen. He had spent

the night on a disused dredger and, Maigret was positive, he hadn't been alone on board.

Then there was the business of the *Saint Michel's* boat, found adrift at the entrance of the harbour. And at the end of the jetty the Inspector had picked up something most unlikely to be found at that particular place: a gold fountain-pen.

The jetty was a wooden structure, built on piles. At the end, beside the green light, an iron ladder led down to the sea. The boat had been found near by. The inference was obvious. The *Saint Michel* had brought a passenger who did not wish to be seen in Ouistreham. He had landed from the boat and let it drift away. At the top of the ladder, as he was hoisting himself on to the jetty, the gold fountain-pen had slipped from his pocket. Then he had proceeded to the dredger, where Louis had gone to join him.

There was no alternative explanation; this sequence of events was proved with almost mathematical certainty.

It followed that an unknown man was lying low at Ouistreham. He had not come here for nothing; he had certainly some scheme in mind. And he belonged to a social *milieu* in which gold fountain-pens were used.

Not a sailor, then; not a tramp. Well-to-do; presumably well dressed. A "toff" the countryfolk would call him. And in winter, at Ouistreham, a "toff" was bound to attract attention. He wouldn't dare to leave the dredger by daylight. Whatever he was out to do would be done by night.

So Maigret, as in duty bound, had kept watch all night. A junior officer's job. Hour after dreary hour, under the drizzle, he had peered into the dark recesses of the dredger. Nothing had happened. No one had come ashore. Dawn had risen on his fruitless vigil. And, as the last straw, the hot bath he had been counting on was not forthcoming! His eyes fell on the bed. How about a few hours' sleep?

The hotel-keeper brought the coffee.

"Aren't you going to bed?"

"May do. . . . Would you take a telegram to the post-office?"

A wire to Lucas, his assistant, to come at once. Maigret did not relish the prospect of another night's sentry-go beside the canal.

The window overlooked the harbour, Joris's cottage, the sand-banks in the bay that the ebb was now disclosing. As Maigret scribbled the telegram the hotel-keeper was gazing out of the window. Casually he remarked:

"Hullo! There's the Captain's servant going for a walk."

The Inspector looked quickly round. He saw Julie close the garden gate and start off at a quick pace towards the beach.

"What's over there?"

"I don't follow."

"I mean, where can she be going? Are there any houses in that direction?"

"None at all. It's just bare beach, and no one uses it, as it's cut up by breakwaters and mud-holes."

"There's no road or path?"

"No. You come to the mouth of the Orne, and there's nothing but marshes along the bank. Wait a bit! There are some pits dug in the marshes which are used for duck-shooting."

Maigret was already on his feet. His brows were knitted. He strode rapidly across the bridge; when he reached the beach, Julie was only a couple of hundred yards ahead of him.

Nobody was about. No sign of life along the foreshore, except the sea-gulls wheeling and wailing overhead. On the right was a line of dunes; the Inspector turned off amongst them, so as not to be seen.

The air was brisk, the sea smooth. Only a thin ribbon of

white foam lapped the shore, with a low rustle of shells and shingle.

Obviously Julie was not out for a mere stroll. She walked quickly, holding her small black coat tightly wrapped about her. There had been no time since Joris's death to buy mourning, so she had fallen back on the darkest garments she possessed—that old-fashioned coat, a cloche hat, grey woollen stockings.

She moved in jerks, as her feet stuck in the loose sand. Twice she looked back, but failed to see Maigret, who was hidden by the sand-hills.

At last, about a mile from Ouistreham, she swerved off to the right—so abruptly that the Inspector all but let himself be seen. His first idea was that she must be making for a shooting-pit. But in the wide expanse of rank grass and sand there was no sign of human life.

Only a small decrepit building, one wall missing, that faced the sea, some five yards inland from high-water mark. There, centuries ago, most likely, pious hands had built a little chapel.

There was a vaulted roof, and the gap in the walls enabled Maigret to gauge their thickness, a yard or so of solid stone.

After entering the chapel, Julie walked to the far end; and at once Maigret heard a rustle of small objects being displaced —sea-shells, judging by the sound.

He crept forward. In the eastward wall was a small railed-off recess. Beneath it a sort of tiny altar. Julie was stooping, hunting for something.

Suddenly she looked up. The Inspector had no time to take cover.

"What are you doing here?" she cried.

"What are *you* doing?"

"I . . . I've come to pray to Our Lady of the Dunes."

She was obviously worried. Her whole demeanour showed that she had something to hide. Evidently she had passed an almost sleepless night, for her eyes were bloodshot. She had dressed in haste; two wisps of hair straggled out under the brim of her hat.

"Ah! So this place is dedicated to Our Lady of the Dunes."

Looking more carefully, he descried behind the bars a statue of the Virgin, but so worn and worm-eaten as to be almost shapeless. Round the little shrine was a jumble of inscriptions cut in the stone with penknives or pointed stones, or scribbled in pencil:

"*Please make Denise pass her exam.*" "*Please, Our Lady, may little Joey learn to read soon.*" "*Please give good health to all the family, especially poor Grandpa and Grandmama.*" Less devout inscriptions, too. Hearts pierced by arrows. "*True lovers, Bob and Jeanne.*"

Shreds of what had once been flowers still clung to the railing. But what made the chapel different from others was a pyramid of shells on the small tumbledown altar.

On each something was written, usually in pencil—in childish or illiterate writing for the most part. "*May they have a good catch in Newfoundland so that dad needut go to sea again.*"

The floor was of beaten earth. Through the gap in the walls one saw a stretch of golden sand, a silver expanse of sea shimmering in the morning light. Julie kept eyeing apprehensively the heap of shells, though she tried not to look in that direction.

"Did you bring one?" Maigret asked.

She shook her head.

"But just before I came you were moving them about. What were you looking for?"

"Nothing. I only . . ." She paused.

"Yes?"

"Oh, nothing." An obstinate look had settled on her face. She wrapped her coat more tightly round her.

Maigret decided to examine the shells one by one. Suddenly he smiled. On a big clam-shell he had read: "*Our Lady of the Dunes, please may my brother Louis bring it off and all of us be happy.*" It bore a date: "*September* 13". . . . So this rustic votive offering had been placed here three days before Joris disappeared.

Probably Julie had come here to retrieve it.

"This is what you were looking for, isn't it?"

"That's my business!"

She stared at the shell. She seemed on the point of making a rush at Maigret, snatching it from his hand.

"Give it back to me. Put it back where you found it."

"All right, I'll put it back—but, mind, you've got to leave it here. Come along now. We'll have a talk on the way home."

"I've nothing to tell you."

Their feet sank into the sand and they leant forward as they walked. A cold wind nipped their cheeks, reddened their noses.

"Your brother's always been a bit of a ne'er-do-well, eh?" No reply. She was staring straight in front of her, along the beach. "There's some things," Maigret went on, "that it's no good trying to conceal. I don't mean only that . . . that Louis fell foul of the law on one occasion."

"You've said it!" she broke in. "My brother's a jailbird. Twenty years hence they'll still be throwing it up at me."

"No, Julie, that's not what I meant. Louis is a fine sailor. First-rate at his job, so I've been told. Good enough to act as captain's mate. Only—at times he gets into bad company, drinks too much and paints the town red. Then, instead of

going back to his ship, he loafs about for weeks on end, doing nothing. When all his money's gone he comes to you for help. On one occasion, some weeks ago, he asked Joris to help him out. When the drinking bout is over he settles down again and does another spell of honest work."

"Well?"

"What was it that on the thirteenth of September you wanted Louis to 'bring off'?"

She stopped walking and looked him in the face. She had had time to think things out and was much calmer now. There was a charming gravity in the young eyes.

"Somehow I knew it would mean trouble for us all. But my brother hasn't done anything wrong. I swear to you that if he'd killed the Captain I'd have been the first to see he got what he deserved." Her voice had an undertone of strong emotion. "It's just bad luck that things look black against him. And, of course, his being a 'jailbird.' Catch people forgetting that! Whenever anyone does anything wrong at Ouistreham, they try to fasten it on him."

"What was Louis's plan?"

"It wasn't what I'd call a plan. Something quite simple really. He'd met a very rich gentleman—at Havre or in England, I don't know which. He never told me his name. This gentleman had taken it into his head to buy a yacht. He'd had enough of life on shore and wanted to go for cruises. He asked Louis to look round for a boat for him."

They were still standing on the beach. All that could be seen of Ouistreham was a white tower outlined against a still paler sky—the lighthouse.

"Louis talked to his boss about it. There's been a slump, you know, and Lannec wanted to sell his schooner. The *Saint Michel*'s just the sort of craft that could be easily converted into a yacht. My brother was to get ten thousand

francs if the deal came off. What's more, the buyer talked of taking him on as skipper; he wanted somebody reliable."

She shot a quick glance at Maigret, conscious that she had blundered in using the word "reliable" of an ex-convict, and half expecting to see an ironic smile on his lips.

But there was not the ghost of a smile. Maigret was pondering deeply. He was impressed by the straightforwardness of her story; it had the ring of truth.

"So you can't tell me the name of the man who wanted to buy the *Saint Michel*?"

"No."

"Where was your brother to meet him?"

"I don't know."

"When?"

"Quite soon. Louis told me that the alterations were to be made in Norway. In a month's time they'd be off on their first voyage. To Egypt, he said."

"Was the man a Frenchman?"

"I don't know."

"You came to the chapel today to take away your shell, didn't you?"

"Well, I thought that if someone found it it might give them . . . wrong ideas. . . . You don't believe a word of what I'm saying, do you?"

Maigret made as if he had not heard, and asked:

"Seen your brother?"

She gave a start. "When?"

"Last night, or this morning?"

"What? Is Louis here?" She sounded at once alarmed and puzzled.

"The *Saint Michel*'s in."

This, apparently, reassured her somewhat; it looked as if she'd been afraid her brother might turn up without his ship.

"I suppose he's gone on to Caen," she said.

"No. He spent the night on board one of the dredgers."

"Let's walk," she said. "It's cold standing about."

The sky was getting overcast, the sea-wind freshening.

"Does he often spend the night like that, on a laid-up ship?"

No answer. Neither seemed to have any more to say. The only sound was the crunch of sand under their feet and the light patter of sea-lice hopping away from their meal on the seaweed cast up by the tide.

Two pictures were linking up in Maigret's mind. A yacht; a gold fountain-pen. The link formed almost automatically. Till now the gold fountain-pen had been a puzzle; it didn't fit in with the *Saint Michel* and her rather rapscallion crew. But a yacht—that was another story. A well-to-do, middle-aged man looking for a yacht to cruise about in might very well possess a gold fountain-pen, and lose it.

However, there remained an element of mystery. Why on earth should the man, instead of coming with the schooner into port, have landed from the ship's boat at the end of the jetty, and then slunk off to hide in a more or less water-logged dredger?

"When your brother came to see you on the night before Joris disappeared, did he say anything about the man who wanted to buy the schooner? Did he tell you, for instance, that the man was on board?"

"No, he simply said the deal was practically fixed up."

They were walking past the lighthouse. Joris's cottage was on their left; flowers that he had planted in the garden were still in bloom.

Julie's face clouded over; she cast a listless glance around, as if she had lost interest in life.

"The lawyer will be sending for you to hear the Will, I expect. You're a rich woman now."

"Nothing doing!" she said curtly.

"What do you mean?"

"You can't bamboozle me. The Captain wasn't at all well off. I know it as well as you do."

"How can you be sure?"

"He told me everything. If he'd had a pile, I'd have known it. Do you know, last winter he couldn't bring himself to spend three thousand francs on a shot-gun. And I know he was awfully keen on getting it. He'd seen the mayor's and asked how much it cost." They had reached the garden gate. "Won't you step inside?"

"No. But I may look in later."

She was obviously reluctant to enter the lonely cottage. . . .

The next two hours passed uneventfully. Maigret prowled round the dredger like a tripper eyeing respectfully a big machine whose monstrous gadgets—curly iron pipes, buckets, chains, and capstans—fascinate and mystify him.

By eleven he was back in the harbour, having a drink with the men from the lock.

"Anyone seen Big Louis?"

Yes, he had been seen, quite early in the morning. He had had two glasses of rum, then started off along the high road.

Maigret felt half asleep. Had he caught a chill last night? he wondered. Certainly he had all the symptoms of a man who's in for a bad cold. And this betrayed itself in his movements and his eyes, which had lost their usual alertness.

He took no trouble to conceal his discomfort, and it made the men around him still more ill at ease. They shot stealthy glances at him. Conversation flagged. At last Delcourt asked:

"What shall I do with the boat?"

"Oh, tie it up somewhere."

Then Maigret put a rather clumsy question:

"Has anyone here seen a stranger about in the village this morning? Or anything unusual happening near the dredgers?"

No, no one had noticed anything. But his words had a curious effect. Now he had suggested it, everybody expected to see something! A sort of collective hunch—that sensational developments were at hand! The cycle of events was not yet closed. A link was missing still.

A steamer hooted for the lock-gates to open. Everyone rose. Maigret trudged wearily to the post-office to see if there was anything for him. Only a wire from Lucas to say he was arriving at 2.10. . . .

Punctually the diminutive train—like a child's toy, with carriages built on the 1850 model—that plies along the canal-bank between Caen and Ouistreham, fussed in, puffing and blowing, with a squeal of antiquated brakes.

As Lucas alighted and held out his hand, he was startled by Maigret's look of gloom.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm all right."

Lucas forgot his normal deference and laughed outright.

"Well, you certainly don't look it. . . . By the way, I haven't lunched."

"Come along to the hotel. They'll dig up something for you."

While Lucas had a hasty meal in the big dining-room they conversed in undertones. The proprietor hovered round, evidently anxious to put in a word.

At last, as he served the cheese, he judged the moment had come.

"Have you heard what's happened to the mayor?"

Maigret gave a start, and he looked so alarmed that the man made haste to add:

"Oh, it's nothing serious. I hear he had a fall when he was coming downstairs this morning. Nobody seems to know exactly what happened, but he knocked his face about so badly that he's had to take to his bed."

Then Maigret had an inspiration. The word is not too strong, for it was in a flash that his lively imagination visualized the incident.

"Is Madame Grandmaison still at Ouistreham?"

"No, she left this morning with her daughter. I expect she's gone to Caen. She took the car."

Maigret's incipient cold had vanished as if by magic.

"Aren't you *ever* going to finish your lunch, Lucas?"

"All in good time," Lucas rejoined imperturbably. "I dare say when a chap's had his fill already, the sight of another fellow tucking in is pretty revolting. . . . Anyhow, three minutes more will do me . . . No, don't take the Camembert away yet," he added, to the hotel-keeper.

Chapter VI

THE MAYOR'S MISHAP

THE news, as transmitted by the proprietor of the hotel, was certainly exaggerated. Monsieur Grandmaison was not in bed. So much Maigret discovered for himself at once when, after sending Lucas to keep watch on the dredger, he walked to the mayor's house. From the road he could see beside the biggest window a form, slumped in the time-honoured attitude of convalescence, in an armchair.

Undoubtedly the mayor; though the man's features could not be clearly seen.

There was someone else in the room, standing farther back from the window. His face, too, could not be made out.

When Maigret rang there was more commotion inside the house than is usual when a caller arrives. At last a maid appeared; an elderly, rather sour-faced woman. Evidently she had a profound disdain for visitors as a class, for she did not deign so much as to open her lips.

She pointed to the short flight of steps leading to the hall, leaving Maigret to close the door after him. Then she knocked at a double door and stood aside while Maigret entered the study, unannounced.

There was something peculiar about the whole proceedings. Nothing sensationally so, but a host of small details that seemed out of keeping, a slightly abnormal atmosphere.

The house was the ordinary type of French seaside house, but exceptionally spacious and almost new. Still, considering how rich the Grandmaisons were, owning as they

did the bulk of the shares in the Anglo-Norman Line, there was less display of luxury than one would have expected.

Perhaps, Maigret surmised, they spent their money on the residence at Caen.

He had moved only a few steps into the room when a voice hailed him, from beside the window.

"Who's there? Oh, it's you, Inspector!"

Monsieur Grandmaison was reclining in a big hide armchair, his legs propped on another chair. As he was between Maigret and the light it was hard to see him clearly, but the Inspector noticed that he was wearing a scarf knotted round his neck instead of a collar, and masking his left cheek with his hand.

"Sit down."

Maigret walked round the room, and drew a chair up facing the shipowner. He had some trouble in repressing a smile, so amazing was the sight confronting him. Monsieur Grandmaison's left cheek—he was unable to cover it completely with his hand—was swollen, so was his upper lip. But what the mayor was trying above all to conceal was an enormous black eye!

The spectacle would not have been so comical had not the great man been trying so hard to keep his dignity intact. He did not flinch, but glared at Maigret suspiciously.

"I presume you've come to report the results of your enquiry?"

"No; this is a sort of duty call. I appreciated so much the cordiality with which you received me the other day that I felt it up to me to call and thank you." Maigret never indulged in sarcastic smiles; on the contrary, the more ironical he was, the graver his expression.

Meanwhile his eyes were exploring the study. On the

walls hung structural plans of cargo-boats and photographs of the Company's steamers. The furniture was strictly business-like: plain mahogany. On the desk lay some files, letters, and telegrams. The floor was highly polished. The Inspector's eyes lingered on it with marked satisfaction.

"I hear you've had an accident."

The mayor sighed, shifted his legs, and muttered:

"I slipped coming down the stairs."

"This morning, wasn't it? It must have given Madame Grandmaison a nasty shock."

"My wife had left when it happened."

"Ah yes, of course. It's not the time of year for staying at the seaside. Unless one's keen on duck-shooting. Madame Grandmaison's gone back to Caen with your daughter, I suppose?"

"No. To Paris."

A grey flannel shirt, dark trousers, carpet slippers, an old dressing-gown. . . . This morning the shipowner had none of his usual spruceness.

"What was there at the foot of the stairs?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what did you fall on?"

A venomous glance; then the mayor replied:

"Why, on the floor, of course."

A transparent lie. A man couldn't get a black eye like that by falling on the floor. Nor those tell-tale marks of clutching fingers round his throat.

When the scarf moved the merest fraction of an inch, Maigret clearly saw the bruises it was intended to hide.

"You were alone in the house, of course?"

"Why 'of course'?"

"Well, accidents have a way of happening when there's nobody about."

"The maid was out doing her marketing."

"Is she the only servant here?"

"There's a gardener. But he's gone to Caen today, shopping."

"It must have been a very disagreeable experience."

What, above all, baffled the mayor was Maigret's imperturbable gravity; he sounded genuinely concerned.

It was only half-past three, but dusk was falling already, the room getting dark. Maigret's hand went to his pocket.

"You don't mind if I smoke a pipe?"

"If you prefer a cigar, you'll find some on the mantelpiece."

On a tray stood a bottle of Armagnac. A pile of packing-cases in a corner. Tall doors in plain, polished deal.

"How's your investigation getting on?" the mayor enquired.

Maigret made an evasive gesture. He was keeping a hold on himself to prevent his eyes from straying to the door leading into the next room, the drawing-room. The door was vibrating in a most peculiar manner.

"No results, eh?" the mayor continued.

"Nothing, so far."

"Like to have my opinion? It was a mistake treating this as a complicated case."

"Obviously," Maigret grunted. "Clear as daylight, isn't it? One night a man disappears, and his movements for a month and more cannot be traced. Six weeks later he turns up in Paris. He's been shot through the head and had his skull patched up. His memory's gone. He is brought home and poisoned that very night. Meanwhile three hundred thousand francs have been paid into his account, from Hamburg. . . . A simple case! Nothing complicated about it!"

The tone was mild, but now there was no mistaking the Inspector's meaning.

"Yes, yes. . . . But all the same, it may be simpler than you think. And even supposing there's some mystery behind it, in my opinion it's a great mistake to go about creating—deliberately creating—feelings of uneasiness in the village. You know how those men are ; they drink like fish, their nerves are none too steady at the best of times. If one keeps harping on such matters in the local bar-parlours, it may throw them altogether off their balance."

He had spoken slowly, emphatically, with a stern look on his face and in the tone of a committing magistrate.

"On the other hand, no attempt has been made to co-operate with the proper authorities. I, the mayor of the town, haven't a notion what you're up to, down in the harbour."

"Does your gardener wear rope-soled shoes ?"

The mayor shot a quick glance at the floor. On the polished surface were foot-prints, the criss-cross patterns of jute soles.

"Haven't a notion."

"Sorry to have interrupted. Just an idea that had occurred to me. What were you saying ? . . ."

But the thread of his discourse was broken. Monsieur Grandmaison merely growled :

"Would you hand me that box of cigars on the mantel-piece ? Thanks."

As the cigar touched his wounded lip he winced. After a long puff he spoke again.

"Well, how far have you got with the case ? You must have gathered *some* information anyhow."

"Nothing to speak of."

"That surprises me. Those chaps down in the harbour

aren't lacking in imagination as a rule—especially after a few drinks."

"I suppose you sent Madame Grandmaison to Paris to get her away from . . . from these unpleasant events. Not to mention those which may still occur."

It was not open warfare, but there was an undercurrent of hostility on both sides. Due, perhaps, merely to the different social classes for which the two men stood. Maigret hobnobbed with fishermen and lock-keepers at the "local"; while the mayor entertained high officials with cups of tea, liqueurs, and fancy cakes.

Maigret was just a man—without the "guinea stamp." Whereas Monsieur Grandmaison had an assured position; he was the typical small-town magnate, member of a well-established upper middle-class family, not to mention the owner of a flourishing shipping concern.

True, he affected a democratic manner, was hail-fellow-well-met with all around him. But his geniality was patronizing; put on to curry favour with voters.

There was something formidable about Maigret's stolid tenacity, and Monsieur Grandmaison was rapidly dropping his domineering manner, showing signs of uneasiness. Now, in a last attempt to regain the whip-hand of the conversation, he adopted an angry tone.

"Monsieur Maigret"—the way he said the words was a masterpiece of haughty condescension—"Monsieur Maigret, permit me to remind you that as the mayor of this township . . ."

The Inspector rose—so casually that the mayor could only gaze at him in sheer surprise—walked up to a door and opened it.

"Do come in, Louis! It's getting on my nerves, seeing that door shaking all the time and hearing you puffing like a grampus just behind it."

If Maigret had expected a dramatic scene to follow, he was disappointed. "Big Louis" did as he was told, slouched into the study, and halted, staring glumly at the floor. But it was more the attitude of someone in a quandary than that of a rough sailor ill at ease in the magnificence of a rich man's home.

The mayor puffed furiously at his cigar, gazing straight in front of him.

Dusk had fallen in the room. A gas-lamp was already lit in the street.

"May I turn on the light?" Maigret asked.

"Yes. But draw the curtains first. There's no need for all the passers-by to . . . No. The pull's on the left-hand side. Gently. . . ."

Louis remained standing in the middle of the room, unmoving. Maigret switched on the lights, walked over to the stove and gave it a poke. A habit he had, like his habit of standing on the hearthrug, his hands behind him, toasting his back.

Had the situation changed in any way? There was now a glint of mockery in Monsieur Grandmaison's eyes as he watched the Inspector, who was lost in thought.

"Was Louis here at the time of your . . . accident?"

An emphatic "No!"

"That's just too bad! It might have accounted . . . Well, for instance, when you fell downstairs, your face might have landed on his fist. . . ."

"Yes, and it would have given you another pretext for starting all sorts of crazy rumours and making the poor fellows in the pubs even more jumpy than they are already! . . . I suggest, Inspector, that we've wasted enough time beating about the bush. There are two of us, don't forget; two of us on this case. How do things stand? You came

here from Paris. You brought Captain Joris with you. He was in a pitiable state, and everything goes to show it wasn't here, at Ouistreham, he got his injury. You were here when he was killed. You're conducting this enquiry as you think fit. That's your affair. But don't forget"—his voice was authoritative—"don't forget I've been mayor of this place for nearly ten years. I know the people here and I consider myself responsible for anything that affects their safety. As mayor, I am also head of the local police. Well then . . ." He paused to take a long puff at his cigar; the ash fell, spraying his dressing-gown with grey flakes. "While you've been haunting the local pubs, I've been putting in some work on this case myself—though you may be surprised to hear it."

"And you sent for Louis in the course of your enquiry?"

"I shall send for others, too, if I think fit. . . . Well, I suppose you've nothing more to tell me? No?"

He rose, rather stiffly, to see his visitor to the door.

"I hope," said Maigret quietly, "that you've no objection to my taking Louis with me. I questioned him last night, but there are a few more things I'd like to ask him."

Monsieur Grandmaison's gesture signified that he had no objection. Louis, however, didn't budge, but remained staring bemusedly at the floor.

"Are you coming, Louis?"

"Nao! Ain't a-comin' yet," he muttered in his usual bearish growl.

"Please take note," the mayor put in, "that I've raised no obstacle to his going with you. I draw your attention to this in case you should accuse me of trying to hamper your enquiry. I sent for Louis as I wanted information from him on certain matters. If he chooses to stay, it's presumably because he has something more to tell."

All the same, there was now a sense of apprehension in

the air—not merely in the air, and more than apprehension. For it was almost panic that Maigret glimpsed in the mayor's eyes.

Louis's lips parted in a grin of bestial satisfaction.

"I'll wait for you outside," said the Inspector.

Louis kept silence. It was the mayor who spoke.

"Then, *au revoir*, Inspector Maigret."

As Maigret left the room the maid came hastily from the kitchen; silent and surly as ever, she showed him out and shut the door behind him.

The road was empty. A hundred yards away, a light showed at a window. Beyond it other lights, spaced out at longish intervals, for the houses in Riva Bella Road are surrounded by good-sized gardens.

Maigret walked slowly to the garden gate, his back hunched, his hands in his overcoat pockets. Facing him was a stretch of waste land. This part of Ouistreham is built along the edge of the dunes, and between the gardens and the sea is a strip of sand and stunted grass.

A shadow in the dusk. A voice.

"That you, Inspector?"

"Lucas?"

Each made a quick step forward.

"Why are you here?"

His eyes still fixed on the garden, Lucas whispered:

"The man from the dredger."

"Has he left it?"

"He's here."

"How long has he been here?"

"Barely a quarter of an hour. He's just behind the house."

"Inside the railings?"

"No. . . . He seems to be waiting for someone. I heard your footsteps. So I came to tell you."

"Show me where he is."

Skirting the garden, they came out at the back of the house. Lucas muttered: "Damn!"

"What's up?"

"He's gone."

"Sure?"

"He was standing by that clump of tamarisks."

"Think he's entered the house?"

"Haven't a notion."

"Stop here. Don't move for any reason whatsoever."

Maigret ran back to the road. No one in sight. A strip of light showed through the study window, but the window-ledge was out of reach.

He made up his mind. Crossing the garden, he rang the bell. The maid opened almost at once.

"I think I left my pipe in the study."

"I'll go and see."

She left him standing at the door. No sooner was she out of sight than he ran up the stairs on tiptoe and peeped into the study.

The mayor was sitting in the same place, his legs stretched in front of him. A small table had been placed beside his chair. Louis was seated on the other side of the table.

Between them was a draught-board. The sailor moved a piece, then rumbled:

"Your turn."

As the mayor watched the maid hunting for the pipe, his nerves were obviously on edge. At last he broke out:

"You can see for yourself it isn't here. Tell the Inspector he must have dropped it on the road. . . . Your move, Louis."

Quite at home, Louis turned to the maid.

"Bring us some drinks, Marguerite, while you're about it."

Chapter VII

MAIGRET SETS THE PACE

"THINGS are going to hum!" thought Lucas when he saw the look on Maigret's face as he left the house. "Primed up, he is! I know the signs." The Inspector was gazing straight in front of him, with seemingly unseeing eyes.

"Wasn't he in the house?"

"No, and it's no use wasting our time over him. We'd need a dozen men at least to round up a fellow hiding in the dunes."

His overcoat buttoned up to the neck, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, Maigret was chewing the stem of his pipe.

"See that chink between the curtains?" he said, pointing to the study window. "And that low wall just in front? I rather think that if you got on to the wall you could see into the room."

Lucas was almost as burly as Maigret, but a little shorter. With a sigh he scrambled up the wall, after a quick glance down the road in each direction to make sure no one was about.

A wind had sprung up with the nightfall; a sea-wind that grew stronger every minute and whistled through the trees.

"Can you see in?"

"The wall's a bit too low. Another six or eight inches and I'd manage it."

Without replying, Maigret crossed the road to a stone-heap he had noticed, fetched some big stones and put them on the wall.

"That better?"

"I can see the edge of the table now, but I can't see their faces."

Maigret fetched some more stones.

"That's done it. They're playing draughts. The maid's come in with hot drinks of some kind—grog, I should say."

"Stay where you are."

Maigret fell to pacing up and down the road. A hundred yards away was the *Sailors' Rest*; beyond it the harbour. A baker's van came up the road. He was in half a mind to stop it and make sure no one was hidden inside—but dismissed the project with a shrug. Some police operations look quite simple, but don't work out in practice. For instance, a search for the man who had been behind the mayor's house. One would have to scour the dunes, the beach, the village, and the harbour; to have the roads patrolled. Why, a whole squad of police wouldn't be enough! And, even so, if the man kept his wits about him, he'd slip through their fingers.

Moreover, he, Maigret, had no idea who the man was or what he looked like.

He walked back to the wall on which Lucas was still keeping uncomfortable watch.

"What are they doing?"

"Still playing draughts."

"Talking?"

"No, neither has said a word. That convict fellow has his elbows on the table and is at his third grog already."

A quarter of an hour passed. Then they heard the buzz of an electric bell inside the house.

"A telephone call," Lucas said. "The mayor's getting up. No, Louis is lifting the receiver. . . . Louis is hanging up. Looks pleased with himself. . . . They're at their game again."

"Stay here," Maigret said; then walked rapidly towards the café.

There was the usual group of card-players. They asked Maigret to join them in a drink.

"Not just now, thanks. . . . Is there a telephone here, mademoiselle?"

The telephone was in the kitchen, where an old woman was busy cleaning fish.

"Hullo! Ouistreham post-office? Police here. Tell me, who called up the mayor just now?"

"The call was from Caen, sir."

"Number?"

"122. The *Café de la Gare*."

"Thanks." He hung up and went out.

For a moment he stood motionless in the middle of the public room, oblivious of all around him. "It's seven miles from here to Caen." Unknowingly he had said it aloud.

"Eight," amended Captain Delcourt, who had just come in. "How are you, Inspector?"

But Maigret did not hear. "On a bike, say half an hour," he murmured.

He remembered that most of the men working at the lock lived in the village and came to their work on bicycles, which they parked in a shelter opposite the café.

"Please go out and see if all your bicycles are there."

From now on, everything went like clockwork. Maigret's brain worked like a cogwheel geared to the sequence of events.

"Hell! My bike's not there!"

He was not surprised, asked for no details, but walked back to the kitchen and lifted the receiver.

"Police station, Caen, please. Thank you. Is that the central police station? Inspector Maigret speaking—yes, Maigret of the *P.J.* Is there a train to Paris leaving soon?

What? Not before eleven? Listen! Please take this down. I'll number the points.

"One. Find out if Madame Grandmaison—yes, the ship-owner's wife—has really gone to Paris in her car.

"Two. Has any stranger visited Grandmaison's house, or office, today? Yes, yes. That should be easy. Wait, that's not all. You're taking it down, aren't you?

"Three. Have enquiries made at all garages. How many are there at Caen? Twenty? Wait! Only the garages that let out cars concern us. Begin with the ones near the station. Right! Find out if anyone has just hired a car, with or without a driver, to go to Paris. Or has just bought a second-hand car. Hullo! Hold the line, damn it! He may have dumped a bike at Caen. Find out!

"Yes, that's all. Have you enough men to send on all these three enquiries right away? O.K. The moment you have any news, ring me up at the *Sailors' Rest*, Ouistreham. Got it? Right!"

In the café they had heard every word. When Maigret came back into the room everyone was looking badly rattled.

"About my bike," one of them began timidly. "Do you think—?"

But Maigret took no notice. Calling the waitress, he ordered a hot grog. No longer was he the boon companion of the last few days, who stood his rounds of drinks and joined in theirs. It was as if he hardly saw them, had never met them.

"Is the *Saint Michel* back from Caen?"

"She's due in for tonight's tide. But she mayn't be able to go out with the weather as it is."

"A storm?"

"A stiff gale of wind, anyhow. And it's veering north—which is a bad sign hereabouts. Hear it?"

Listening, Maigret heard a sound like a drum beating in the distance, waves breaking on the piles of the jetty. A violent gust rattled the door.

"If there's a ring for me, send someone to let me know at once. I'll be on the road, about a hundred yards from here."

"Outside the mayor's?"

It was all Maigret could do to light his pipe once he was outside. Low, ragged clouds were racing across the sky, seeming to catch in the top branches of the poplars that lined the road. At five yards' distance Sergeant Lucas, standing on the wall, was almost invisible.

"Anything happened?"

"They've stopped playing draughts. Louis seemed to get sick of the game all of a sudden and swept the pieces off the board."

"What are they up to now?"

"The mayor's lying back in his chair. The sailor man's smoking a cigar and swilling grog. He's torn a dozen cigars to shreds in the last half-hour. From the way he grinned, he did it just to spite the other fellow I should say."

"How many drinks?"

"Five or six."

All Maigret could see was a tiny slit of light in the frontage of the house. Some bricklayers cycling home from their work went by. Then a farm-cart. Vaguely aware of people lurking in the darkness, the driver whipped up his horse and looked round nervously several times after he had passed.

"What about the maid?"

"Haven't seen her again. In the kitchen, I expect. I say, am I to stop here much longer? If so, you might put some more stones on the wall; it's the hell of a strain craning my neck all the time."

Maigret did so. The sound of waves was swelling to a roar. Big waves, six-footers, toppling in cataracts of foam.

A hundred yards down the road a door slammed. Someone came up the road from the *Sailors' Rest*, groping his way. Maigret hastened towards him.

"Ah, there you are. You're wanted on the 'phone."

Caen calling—sooner than he'd expected.

"Hullo? Inspector Maigret? Yes, Madame Grandmaison came to Caen this morning in the car. She left her daughter at her house, with the governess, and started off at noon in the direction of Paris. You were right about the stranger, too. Can't think how you tumbled to it! We found the right garage first shot: the one in front of the station. A man turned up there on a bicycle. He tried to hire a car without a driver. The garage people told him they didn't see their way, and so forth. . . .

"The man seemed in a great hurry. He then asked them to sell him a car, a fast one, second-hand if possible. They let him have one for twenty thousand francs. He paid cash. It's a yellow touring-car, lettered *W*, like all cars for sale."

"Do they know which way he went?"

"He asked for information about the road to Paris, *via* Lisieux and Evreux."

"Ring up the police stations at Lisieux, Evreux, and Mantes. And warn Paris to keep a look-out for this car at all the entrances to the city, especially Porte Maillot."

"Should the car be taken in charge?"

"Yes, and the driver too. You have a description of him, haven't you?"

"The garage-keeper supplied one. A rather tall, middle-aged man, well dressed, wearing a light grey suit."

"The same arrangement as before, please. Ring me up here when—"

"Excuse my interrupting. It's just on seven. The telephone to Ouistreham closes down at seven. . . . Unless you go to the mayor's place."

"Why?"

"He has a private line to Caen, and it's on all night."

"Send one of your men to the Exchange and tell him to listen in if anyone calls the mayor. Have you a car?"

"A runabout of sorts."

"Send someone in it to let me know if there's a call. The *Sailors' Rest* will find me, as before."

As he re-entered the public room, Delcourt ventured to ask:

"Are you on the track of the murderer?"

"Haven't an idea!"

The men in the café simply couldn't make out what had come over Maigret! He had seemed quite a good sort, a proper mixer. Now he was stand-offish, snapped a fellow's head off! He left the place without having vouchsafed a scrap of information.

Buttoning up his overcoat, he plunged again into the storm. As he crossed the bridge he felt it vibrating with the fury of the gale.

He walked to Joris's cottage and put his eye to the keyhole. There was a light in the kitchen. Behind the glass-panelled door someone was moving to and fro between the table and the range.

He rang. Julie stopped moving, put down the plate she was carrying, opened the kitchen door, and walked up the hall.

"Who is it?" she asked nervously.

"Inspector Maigret."

She unbolted the door and stood aside to let him pass. Her eyes were still red; she cast frightened glances round her.

"I'm so glad you've come. I can't bear being alone in this house, it gives me the creeps."

He went into the kitchen. It was spick-and-span as usual. On the white oilcloth covering the table were only bread-and-butter and a mug. A sickly-sweet smell came from a saucepan boiling on the fire.

"Hot chocolate?" He sounded surprised.

"Yes. I can't bring myself to cook a proper meal now I'm all alone."

"Carry on with your dinner," Maigret said. "Don't mind me!"

After some demur she complied, filled her mug, and began dipping thick slabs of bread-and-butter in the chocolate. As she munched, she gazed dully in front of her.

"Hasn't your brother been to see you yet?"

"No. I can't make it out. I went down to the harbour just now, hoping to see him. When they're off duty the sailors usually hang about the harbour and—"

"Did you know your brother was a bosom friend of the mayor's?"

She stared at him, open-eyed.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"At this moment they're playing draughts together."

Her first idea was that Maigret was pulling her leg. Then a frightened look settled on her face.

"I can't make head or tail of it."

"Why?"

"Well, the mayor isn't like that with folk like us. He keeps his distance. And anyhow, I know he don't like Louis. He's always making trouble for him. Why, he even tried to prevent him living here."

"How about Captain Joris?"

"I don't follow."

"Was Monsieur Grandmaison on friendly terms with the Captain?"

"Just like he was with everybody else. Passed him the time o' day when they met in the street. Cracked a joke with him. Sometimes, as I told you, he took my gentleman out shooting. But only not to be alone."

"Has the lawyer written to you yet?"

"Yes. I'm the Captain's residuary legatee, he wrote; I don't know what it means. Does it mean I get the house?"

"Yes, and three hundred thousand francs as well."

She showed no interest, but went on eating. Presently she said:

"No, it don't make sense. I can't believe it. I'm certain the Captain never had that much money in all his life."

"Where did he sit? Did he dine in the kitchen?"

"Where you are, in that wicker chair."

"Did you eat together?"

"Yes. Only, of course, I got up to see to the cooking and bring the plates. He used to read the newspaper at dinner. Now and then he'd read a bit out loud."

Maigret was in no mood for sentiment. Yet somehow the restfulness of the atmosphere was having an effect on him. The clock seemed to tick more languidly than clocks elsewhere. A little blob of light swayed to and fro on the wall in front of him—reflected from the bright brass pendulum. The air was heavy with the cloying fumes of chocolate. The wicker chair emitted homely creaks as he shifted his legs, the same sounds as it must have made when Joris sat in it.

Being alone in the house made Julie nervous. Yet she seemed reluctant to go elsewhere. Something, he guessed, kept her here, in these familiar surroundings.

She rose, went to the door. He kept his eyes on her. It

was to let in the white cat. It went straight to a saucer of milk in front of the fire.

"Poor pussy! Her master was very fond of her. After dinner she always jumped on his knee and stayed there till he went to bed."

So profound was the calm as to seem almost ominous. A warm, enervating languor.

"Are you quite sure you've nothing more to tell me, Julie?"

She looked up and gazed at him in a puzzled way.

"I rather think," Maigret went on, "that I'm on the point of finding out the truth. A word from you might help enormously. That's why I ask if you have nothing more to tell me."

"But I've told you everything I know."

"Nothing more about Captain Joris?"

"Nothing."

"About your brother?"

"Nothing, I assure you."

"About someone else who came here, a stranger?"

"I don't know what you mean."

She went on eating the sugary mixture in the mug, the mere sight of which turned Maigret's stomach.

"In that case I'll be off."

She was obviously vexed at the prospect of being left alone again. A question rose to her lips.

"Please, about the funeral. . . . I suppose they can't keep waiting much longer. A corpse . . ."

"He's on ice," Maigret muttered uncomfortably.

Julie shuddered. . . .

* * * *

"Are you there, Lucas?"

It was pitch-dark. The roar of wind and waves drowned

all other sounds. At the lock men were waiting, each at his post, for a steamer from Glasgow that had missed the fairway and could be heard whistling down by the jetties.

"I'm here."

"What are they up to?"

"Eating—lucky devils! Shrimps, clams, an omelette, something that looks like cold veal."

"At the same table?"

"Yes. Louis still has his elbows on it."

"Talking?"

"Hardly at all. I can just see their lips move now and then, but they don't seem to have much to say."

"Drinking?"

"Louis, anyhow, is putting it down all right! There's two bottles of wine on the table—vintage stuff by the look of it—and the mayor keeps on filling up Louis's glass."

"Trying to make him drunk, eh?"

"Looks like it. I say, you should see the maid's face! Scared stiff she is! Every time she has to pass behind the big chap she gives him a wide berth."

"Any more telephone calls?"

"No. Ah, there's Louis blowing his nose with his napkin. He's getting a cigar. He's holding the box out to the mayor. The mayor's shaking his head. Here's the maid again, handing round the cheese." Plaintively Lucas added: "If only I could sit down a bit! My feet are like ice. And I daren't make a movement for fear of falling off my perch!"

But Maigret'd been too often in similar situations himself to feel much compassion for his junior.

"Stop grousing! . . . But I'll go and fetch you some grub."

A hot dinner awaited him at the *Hôtel de l'Univers*. But he merely spread a slice of bread with *pâté* and wolfed it, stand-

ing. Then he made a sandwich for Lucas and put the half-empty bottle of red wine in his pocket.

"That's a shame!" sighed the hotel-keeper. "I've made a *bouillabaisse* specially for you, and you wouldn't get a better one in Marseilles itself!"

But the Inspector was adamant. . . . He went back to the wall, and asked for the *n*th time the usual question:

"What are they up to now?"

"The maid has cleared away. The mayor's leaning back in his chair, smoking one cigarette after another. Louis seems to be going to sleep. He still has a cigar in his mouth, but no smoke's coming from it."

"Has he had more drinks?"

"A wine-glassful of the bottle on the mantelpiece."

"The Armagnac," Maigret murmured.

"Hullo! A light's just gone on, on the floor above. The maid going to bed, most likely. The mayor's rising to his feet. He's . . ."

A sound of voices down by the *Sailors' Rest*. The hum of an engine. People talking.

"A hundred yards up? In the house?"

"No, on the road."

The car had started. Maigret walked towards it. He stopped it some way down the road, not to alarm the people in the house. Policemen in uniform were in the car.

"Any news?"

"Evreux reports that the man in the yellow car has been caught."

"Who is he?"

"There's trouble about that. He's threatening to report us to his ambassador. Says he's been wrongfully arrested."

"A foreigner, eh?"

"Yes, Norwegian. Evreux told us his name over the 'phone. Something like Martineau, it sounded. Identity papers all O.K. Our fellows there are in a stew, want orders what to do next."

"Tell them to bring him here, with the car. They've an officer who can drive it, I suppose. Go back to Caen now. Try to find out where Madame Grandmaison usually stays in Paris."

"We know that already. At the *Lutetia* in the Boulevard Raspail."

"Then ring up, please, and find out if she's arrived and what she's up to. Wait a bit! If she's come there, ask the Superintendent in my office to have her shadowed by an inspector. Got it?"

The car had to back three times to turn on the narrow road. When Maigret returned, he found Lucas scrambling down from his perch.

"What are you up to?"

"Nothing more to be seen."

"Have they left the room?"

"No, but the mayor came to the window just now and drew the curtains tight."

A hundred yards away they saw a line of lights gliding into the lock, the Glasgow steamer. In a lull of the wind they heard orders bawled in English. Then a sudden gust all but whisked the Inspector's bowler hat away.

The light on the upper floor went out abruptly; the whole house now was plunged in darkness.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAYOR'S ENQUIRY

MAIGRET stood in the middle of the road, his hands thrust in his pockets, his brows wrinkled.

"Worried?" asked Lucas, who knew the signs.

"We've got to get inside the darned place somehow," Maigret growled, after gloomily inspecting the dark façade, window by window.

All were shut fast. There was no way of getting in except by the door, to which Maigret now went. He cocked his head, listened. Then signed to Lucas to keep still. Both pressed their ears to the smooth oak panels.

There was no talking. But from the study came a sound of heavy footsteps, and a dull, persistent thudding. It seemed unlikely that a fight was going on. The thuds were much too regular. When two men are fighting in a room, one expects to hear scuffling, furniture banged about, blows being dealt sometimes in quick succession, sometimes spaced out.

This was more of a steady pounding—like a pile-driver at work. By listening intently they could even hear the panting of the man who was delivering the blows.

A grunt at every stroke, followed by a stifled groan.

Maigret's eyes met the sergeant's. He pointed to the lock. Lucas drew a bunch of skeleton-keys from his pocket.

"Not a sound," Maigret whispered.

Silence had fallen in the house. An ominous lull. No

more thuds. No footsteps. Only a faint, almost inaudible sound of gasping, as of a man who is out of breath.

Lucas straightened up. The door was open. On the left a ray of light came from the study door. Maigret shrugged his shoulders petulantly. He was exceeding his rights, and knew it. What made things worse was that the man whose house he had broken into was no less a personage than the local mayor, and no easy customer at the best of times. Still, it had to be done. . . .

From the hall he could still hear only one man's breathing. Nothing stirred. Lucas fingered his revolver. Maigret flung the door open.

Then he stopped dead, for once completely flabbergasted. Perhaps he'd expected to be confronted by another crime. Very different was the scene before him—different and baffling to a degree.

His lip split, chin and dressing-gown streaming with blood, his hair dishevelled, Monsieur Grandmaison looked like a boxer who has just struggled to his feet after severe punishment. He could hardly stand. Propped against the mantelpiece, he was leaning so far back that it was a mystery how he kept his footing on the polished floor.

Two yards away stood Louis, looking more ruffianly than ever, blood on his still clenched fists—the mayor's blood!

It was Louis they had heard panting when they were in the hall. Out of breath, no doubt, after the hammering he had given his victim. The glasses on the table had been upset. His breath reeked of alcohol.

The two police officers were so taken aback, the others so exhausted, that some minutes passed before a word was spoken.

Then Monsieur Grandmaison dabbed his lips with a corner

of his dressing-gown, made an effort to pull himself erect, and spluttered:

"What . . . what the devil . . .?"

"I trust you will excuse me," said Maigret in his politest tone, "for entering your house like this. I heard a noise. The door was open."

"That's a lie," the mayor rejoined. His self-assurance had come back.

"In any case, I'm glad we came in time to protect you from . . ." He glanced towards Louis, who did not seem in the least embarrassed.

On the contrary, a furtive grin twisted his lips; he kept his eyes fixed on the mayor.

"I don't need protection," said Monsieur Grandmaison.

"But—this man's assaulted you. . . . Or hasn't he?"

Standing in front of the mirror, Monsieur Grandmaison was trying to set his clothes to rights. His inability to stanch the flow of blood seemed to exasperate him. The picture he presented at that moment was a curious mixture of strength and weakness, abjection and bravado.

A black eye, scars, and bruises. The pink-and-white cheeks were in a lamentable plight, and there were greenish glints in his eyes.

Still, it was amazing, the promptness with which he was recovering his self-possession—and so effectively that now, propped against the mantelpiece, he rounded on his rescuers.

"I suppose you broke into my house?"

"Excuse me. . . . We came here to protect you."

"That's another lie! You didn't know that I was in any danger. And, what's more, I was *not* in danger," he added emphatically.

Maigret took a long look at Louis's formidable bulk. Not in danger!

"Still, I trust you will allow me to eject our friend here from your house."

"Certainly not."

"He's assaulted you. And in a pretty brutal way."

"We had a discussion. No concern of yours."

"May I take it that when you fell downstairs this morning, you—shall we say?—came in contact somehow with this fellow's fist?"

Louis's face split in a prodigious grin. He was thoroughly enjoying the situation. While recovering his breath he had not missed the least detail of the scene, a scene that had filled him with obvious glee. He, anyhow, knew what lay behind it, could relish its humour to the full.

"I informed you, Monsieur Maigret, that I was conducting an enquiry on my own account. I haven't interfered with your investigations; kindly do the same for me. And don't be surprised if I lodge a complaint against you for breach of domicile."

He cut a figure at once tragic and comical. He was trying to stand on his dignity. Straightening himself up to his full height. And all the time his lip was bleeding, his face battered to a pulp, his dressing-gown blood-stained, be-draggled.

And Louis gave the impression of egging him on.

It was easy enough to picture what had been happening in the room during the last ten minutes—the ex-convict sledge-hammering his victim's face till his arm was tired.

"You must excuse me, sir," said Maigret, "if I don't leave at once. As you have the only telephone available at night in Ouistreham, I ventured to arrange for my calls to be made here."

Without replying, Monsieur Grandmaison rapped out:

"Shut the door."

Then he picked up one of the cigars lying scattered on the mantelpiece and tried to light it. The effect of the tobacco on his wounded lip was evidently painful, for he flung the cigar away impatiently.

Maigret said: "Lucas, will you call Caen for me?"

His eyes roved from the mayor to Louis, and back to the mayor. He was trying to set his thoughts in order. At first sight of the two men in the room it was Monsieur Grandmaison who had seemed to be the under-dog; in a state of not only physical but moral inferiority. He had been thrashed and exposed to the public gaze under the most humiliating circumstances.

And yet he had "saved his face"—if not quite literally! Within a few minutes he had taken hold of himself. With such success that much of the prestige due to his social rank was coming to the fore again. He was almost calm; his expression supercilious.

Louis had, ostensibly, the easier rôle. The top-dog's. Not a wound, not a scratch to show. A moment ago there had been a look of almost childish exultation on his face. Now, however, he was visibly wilting; he didn't know what to do with himself, where to look.

Maigret was reflecting: If one of the two men's the moving spirit, which is it? Hard to tell. Sometimes one would say, the mayor. Sometimes, Louis.

"Hullo! Caen police station? Inspector Maigret asks me to say that he's spending the night at the mayor's house. No. 1, Ouistreham. Yes, ring him up here. Hullo? What, Lisieux already? Thanks. Yes, I'll tell him." He turned to Maigret. "The car's just left Lisieux. They'll be here in three-quarters of an hour."

"Did I hear you say . . .?" the mayor began.

"That I'd be here all night? Yes. With your leave,

naturally. You've twice referred to an enquiry you are making on your own account. That being so, I suggest we pool the information each of us has managed to collect so far." He was not ironical. He was fuming inwardly. Raging at the predicament in which he had involved himself. Furious, above all, that he couldn't make head or tail of the turn of events.

He turned to Louis.

"Will you tell me why, when we entered the house, you were engaged in . . . in beating up the mayor?"

Louis did not reply, but shot a glance at the shipowner, as if to say: *You* answer that!

Monsieur Grandmaison said curtly:

"That's my business."

"Obviously. Everyone has the right to let himself be beaten up if it amuses him," snapped Maigret. He was now in a tearing rage. "Lucas, ring up the *Lutetia Hotel*."

The blow struck home. Monsieur Grandmaison opened his mouth to speak. His grip tightened on the marble chimneypiece.

Lucas was holding the receiver.

"Three minutes to wait? Right. Thank you, yes."

"Doesn't it strike you, Monsieur Grandmaison," Maigret said, "that this enquiry's taking a rather peculiar turn? . . . By the way, perhaps you could do me a service. I expect that, as a shipowner, you've a wide circle of acquaintances, including foreigners. Have you ever heard of a man called Martineau or some such name? He comes from Bergen or Trondhjem. A Norwegian, though the name sounds French."

Silence. Louis's eyes grew hard. Unconsciously, it seemed, he reached towards one of the glasses lying on the table, filled it, drank it off.

"So you don't know him? A pity. He's coming here. . . ."

Well, he had drawn blank again. That settled it. He knew now that both men had decided on their line of conduct. Not to answer. Not to betray the least emotion.

Monsieur Grandmaison had changed his tactics. Still with his back to the mantelpiece, his calves toasted by the fire, he was staring at the floor with studied indifference. . . . A grotesque face with its loosely moulded features, now mottled black and red and blue, a trickle of blood along the chin, a look of strong determination oddly combined with panic—or distress.

Louis was sitting astride a chair. After some yawns he seemed to be dozing off.

The telephone rang. Maigret snatched up the receiver.

"*Lutetia Hotel?* Don't cut me off. I want to speak to Madame Grandmaison. Yes. She came this afternoon or evening. Right, I'll hold the line."

"I presume," the mayor said in a rather wooden voice, "you don't intend to drag my wife into the, to say the least of it, peculiar proceedings you're indulging in just now?"

Maigret took no notice. He remained standing with the receiver to his ear, staring at the table-cloth.

"Hullo? Yes? Oh, she's gone out. Wait! Let's start at the beginning. When did this lady arrive? Seven. Thank you. With her car and chauffeur. She dined at the hotel. After dinner someone rang her up and she went out at once. Right. No, that's all, thanks."

No one showed the least emotion. Monsieur Grandmaison seemed calmer. Maigret put back the receiver, picked it up again.

"Caen telephone exchange? Police here. Will you tell me if someone rang up Paris from this number before the

call I've just put through? Yes? About a quarter of an hour ago. For the *Lutetia Hotel*, wasn't it? Thank you."

Beads of perspiration glistened on his forehead. Slowly he filled a pipe and tamped the tobacco with his forefinger. Then he went to the table and helped himself to a drink.

"I suppose you realize, Inspector, that everything you're doing here is quite illegal? You broke into my house. You're staying in it without my leave. The steps you've just taken are calculated to alarm my family, and, finally, you're treating me like a criminal in the presence of a third party. For all this, I warn you, you'll be brought to book."

"You've said it!"

"Well, as I'm no longer master in my own house, I'll ask your permission now to go to bed."

"No." Maigret pricked up his ears. He had heard the sound of an approaching car.

"Go and open the front door, Lucas."

Unthinkingly he put a shovelful of coal on the fire. He turned round at the exact moment the new-comers entered.

There were two constables from Evreux, a handcuffed man between them.

"You can go back," he said to the constables. "No, go to the end of the road and wait for me there—all night, if necessary."

The mayor had not moved. Nor had the sailor. They gave an impression of complete indifference; whether authentic or assumed there was no telling. The handcuffed man was calm; a smile rose to his lips when he saw Monsieur Grandmaison's battered face.

He glanced round the group.

"Who is in charge here, please?"

Maigret made a deprecatory gesture, as if to say the

constables had gone beyond their orders; took a small key from his pocket and unlocked the handcuffs.

"Thank you. I must say I was greatly surprised at—"

Maigret broke in angrily.

"At what? At being arrested? Were you really so surprised as that?"

"Well, I'm still waiting to learn what charge is brought against me."

"For one thing, the theft of a bicycle."

"Not theft. I borrowed it. The garage-keeper from whom I bought the car will confirm that. I told him to send back the bicycle to Ouistreham, with a small sum as compensation to its owner."

"Did you now? . . . By the way, you're not a Norwegian."

The man had not the accent nor the look of one. He was tall, sturdy, middle-aged. His well-cut clothes were a little soiled.

"Excuse me, I am. Not by birth certainly, but I've been naturalized."

"And you live at Bergen, I believe?"

"At Tromsö, in the Lofotens."

"Have you a business there?"

"I own a factory for treating the waste products of the cod-fishing industry."

"Cod-roes, for instance?"

"Yes, the roes and other waste products. We extract oil from the heads and livers. And we use the bones to make a fertilizer."

"Capital! Just what I wanted! . . . Now, will you tell me what you were doing at Ouistreham on the night of September the sixteenth?"

The man showed no signs of confusion; he gazed calmly round the room.

"I was not in Ouistreham."

"Where were you?"

"Where were *you*?" He picked himself up, smiled. "I mean, could you possibly say, off-hand, exactly what you were doing on a given day, at a given time, when more than a month's elapsed?"

"Were you in Norway?"

"I expect so."

"Know this?" Maigret handed the man a gold fountain-pen.

"Thanks," he said, slipping it into his pocket without the least sign of trepidation.

A good-looking man, about the same age and height as the mayor, but slimmer, wirier. Dark eyes glowing with vitality. A smile on the thin lips, a smile of complete self-assurance.

He answered the Inspector's questions calmly, good-humouredly.

"May I assume," he said, "that there's been some misunderstanding? I'd like to be getting on to Paris."

"That's another matter. . . . Where did you first meet 'Big Louis'?"

The Norwegian's eyes did not, as Maigret had expected, swerve towards the sailor.

"Big Louis?" he repeated with a puzzled air.

"You met Joris, I take it, when he was on one of his voyages north?"

"Sorry! I don't follow. . . ."

"Naturally! And if I ask you why, instead of going to a hotel, you spent the night on a water-logged dredger, you'll go on staring at me like a stuffed owl, eh?"

"Well, really . . .! Put yourself in my place."

"Yet it's a fact you came to Ouistreham last night on the

Saint Michel. It's a fact you landed at the entrance of the harbour in the ship's boat. You went to the dredger and spent the night on board. This afternoon you came and had a look at the house where we now are, then 'borrowed' a bike and rode to Caen. You bought a car there. Drove towards Paris. Were you going to meet Madame Grand-maison at the *Lutetia*? If so, there's no point in your starting off again. Unless I'm greatly mistaken, she'll turn up here tonight."

There was a pause. The mayor stood rigid as a figure carved in stone, his eyes so set as to appear quite lifeless. Louis was still astride his chair, yawning, scratching his head. Seated when all the others in the room were standing, he seemed to dissociate himself from the proceedings. Maigret turned to the Norwegian.

"Your name is Martineau?"

"Yes, Jean Martineau."

"Well, Monsieur Jean Martineau, just think it over. Perhaps you may find you've something to tell me, after all. It's heavy odds on one of the persons in this room being sent up for trial before many days are out, let me inform you."

"And let *me* inform *you* that not only have I nothing to say, but I must ask your leave to communicate with my consul and ask him to take action."

Mere bluff—or was it bluff? The mayor had made a similar threat. Only Louis refrained from protest, taking the situation philosophically—provided drinks were forthcoming now and then.

Outside it was blowing great guns; with the full tide the gale had reached its maximum intensity.

The look on Lucas's face spoke volumes. He was obviously thinking: "Here's a pretty kettle of fish! If we don't get at something soon, we're for it!"

Maigret was stumping up and down the room, puffing furiously at his pipe.

"So neither of you knows anything about what happened to Captain Joris, about his death?"

They shook their heads. Maigret's gaze kept coming back to Martineau.

A sound of hurried footsteps. A volley of agitated knocks on the front door. After a moment's hesitation Lucas went and opened it. Someone burst into the room. It was Julie. Flustered, out of breath.

"Inspector!" she panted. "My brother . . ."

She stopped short, stared aghast at Louis, who was slowly raising his huge bulk from the chair, his eyes intent on her.

"Yes?" Maigret prompted. "Your brother, you were saying. . . . What about him?"

"Nothing. I . . . I only . . ."

She tried to smile, then made a hasty movement of retreat. As she did so she blundered into Martineau, glanced at him and, without seeming to recognize him, murmured: "Sorry, sir."

The door had been left open. A gust of clammy wind swept through the room.

Chapter IX

A CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE

JULIE told her story in little, breathless phrases.

"I was alone in the house. I felt nervous. I went to bed with my clothes on. Someone started banging at the front door. It was Lannec. My brother's captain, you know."

"So the *Saint Michel*'s in."

"She was in the lock when I went by. Lannec wanted to see my brother at once. They're in a hurry to sail, it seems. I told him Louis hadn't put his nose inside the house. He started mumbling something. I couldn't quite make out what he meant, but it made me frightened. . . ."

Louis was staring morosely at the floor. Now he shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say: "Just like a woman to panic over nothing!"

"Why did you come here?" Maigret enquired.

"I asked Lannec if Louis was in danger. He said 'Yes,' and perhaps it was too late already. So I ran down to the harbour, and they told me you were here."

Maigret turned to Louis.

"So you're in danger, are you?"

Louis's only answer was a huge guffaw, more uncouth even than his usual laugh.

"What was Lannec worried about, then?"

"How the hell should I know?"

Maigret's eyes settled on the faces of those present, one by one. He murmured pensively, if with a touch of irritation: "So it comes to this. Not one of you knows anything.

You're all in the same boat. The mayor here doesn't know Monsieur Martineau, and he hasn't a notion why this fellow Louis, who to all appearances is a crony of his, after an excellent dinner and a game of draughts, should suddenly start knocking him about."

No one spoke.

"Stranger still! You, Mayor, let Louis treat you like this as if it was the most natural thing in the world! You don't resist. You refuse to lodge a complaint. You don't even tell the man to clear out."

He turned to Louis.

"You, too, know nothing. You spend a night on the dredger, but you don't know who's with you on board. You're entertained here like a lord, and all the gratitude you show is to bash-in your host's face. And, of course, you've never set eyes on Monsieur Martineau!"

Not an eyelid twitched. All stared obstinately at the carpet.

"And you, Monsieur Martineau, you're just as bad! Your mind's a perfect blank. I wonder, do you even know how you came here from Norway? No, I thought not. You prefer dossing on a dredger to sleeping at a hotel. You steal a man's cycle, buy a car to go to Paris. But you know nothing. You've never met Monsieur Grandmaison or Captain Joris. . . . And you, Julie, naturally you know even less than the others."

He gazed despondently at Lucas. Lucas understood the look. It was out of the question arresting all these people. There were grounds for suspicion—unaccountable behaviour, lies, inconsistencies—against each. But nothing definite with which to charge them.

Maigret glanced at the clock. Eleven. Knocking out his pipe over the fireplace, he said in his grumpiest tone:

"I must ask all of you to remain at the disposal of justice; though you profess to know nothing, I shall certainly have further questions to put to you. May I assume, Monsieur Grandmaison, that you have no intention of leaving Ouistreham?"

"Certainly."

"Thank you. You, Monsieur Martineau, can take a room at the *Hôtel de l'Univers*, where I'm staying."

The Norwegian bowed assent.

"Lucas, take this gentleman to the *Univers*."

He turned to Louis and Julie.

"You two, come along with me."

Julie had started from home without an overcoat. Seeing her shivering, her brother took off his jacket and forced her to put it round her shoulders.

The noise of the storm made conversation almost impossible. They walked with their heads lowered, battling against an icy wind that whistled in their ears and lashed their cheeks, making their eyelids smart like fire.

The *Sailors' Rest* was brightly lit. For the moment the lock was clear of traffic and the lock-keepers were flocking down for "a quick one"—in most cases a hot grog. All eyes turned to Maigret and his two companions, and followed them as they struggled across the bridge in the teeth of the gale.

"Is that the *Saint Michel*?" Maigret sounded puzzled.

A schooner was coming out of the lock, but she looked much bigger than the *Saint Michel* as he remembered her.

"Aye, they're in ballast," Louis grunted.

Meaning that the schooner had unloaded her cargo at Caen and was now travelling empty to pick up a cargo at some other port.

They had nearly reached Joris's cottage when a dim form

loomed up in front. In the darkness it was impossible to make out the man's face till he was almost touching them. A rather shaky voice addressed Louis:

"Ah, there you are. Hurry up! Time to get under way."

Maigret's gaze rested for a moment on the little Breton skipper's face; then veered seawards. Great waves were crashing on the breakwaters with a thunderous, incessant roar, and the sky was a welter of storm-clouds.

The *Saint Michel*, which had come alongside the jetty, was almost invisible but for the tiny flicker of a lamp hung on the deckhouse.

"Going out, are you?" asked Maigret.

"Aye."

"Where to?"

"La Rochelle. For a cargo of wine."

"Can't you manage without Louis?"

"D'you think two men can handle a ship in weather like this?"

Julie was half frozen, stamping her feet, as she listened to this conversation. Her brother's eyes wandered from Maigret to the schooner, from which came faint creaks of tackle straining in the gale.

"Go back to your ship," said Maigret to the skipper, "and wait for me on board."

"But . . ."

"But what?"

"In two hours' time it'll be too late. Tide's on the ebb." A glint of apprehension showed in his eyes. He was obviously ill at ease; his gaze shifted from one face to the other. "I gotta earn my living," he added.

Louis and he were exchanging furtive glances. Maigret spotted at once what was in the wind. His intuition was just then keyed up to its highest pitch. The little skipper was

conveying by his look: "The schooner's quite close. There's only one warp to cast off. Lay this interfering flattie out and we can make a getaway."

Louis hesitated, gazed mournfully at his sister, sighed, shook his head.

"Go to your ship and wait," Maigret repeated.

"But—"

The Inspector turned on his heel and beckoned the others to follow him to the cottage. . . .

* * * *

It was the first time he had seen brother and sister together. There was a good fire burning in Captain Joris's kitchen. The flue of the range was wide open, and at times the roaring of the flames gave place to a sudden detonation, like a backblast.

"Let's have something to drink," the Inspector suggested to Julie, who went at once to the cupboard and produced a bottle of spirits and three gaily painted glasses.

Maigret was conscious of being *de trop*. Julie was yearning for a heart-to-heart talk with her brother. His expression as he watched her told of a very real affection, not unmixed with a certain mawkish sentimentality.

After handing the two men their glasses, Julie, like the good little housewife she was, remained standing and busied herself with the fire.

"To the memory of Captain Joris," said Maigret, raising his glass.

There was a long silence. As the Inspector had intended. It gave time for the restful atmosphere of the little kitchen to take effect on Louis and his sister. And gradually the steady ticking of the clock, the drone of the stove, acted like music on their jangled nerves. The blood came back to their cheeks, which had been numbed by the blasts outside; their

eyes brightened. The pungent fumes of Calvados rose in the air.

"Captain Joris," Maigret repeated musingly. "Why, I'm sitting just where he used to sit: in his armchair. This comfortable old wicker chair, which creaks every time one moves. If he was alive, I suppose he'd be coming back from the lock just about now. And he'd ask you for a glass of something to warm him up—eh, Julie?"

She gazed at him wide-eyed, then looked away.

"He wouldn't go up to bed at once, would he? He'd take off his boots. And you, Julie, would bring him his slippers. He'd say: 'A dirty night. And the *Saint Michel*'s gone out into the storm. Poor chaps, God protect them!'"

"How did you know?"

"What?"

"That he used to say 'God protect them!' when he'd seen a ship off on a night like this?"

She was greatly moved. She gazed at Maigret with a hint of gratitude in her eyes. Unlike Louis, who had a surly look.

"He'll never say it again. A shame, isn't it? He was happy. He'd a nice house, and lots of the flowers he was so fond of in his garden. Everyone liked him, so I'm told. And then—there was someone who put an end to all that, brutally —with a pinch of white powder in a tumbler."

Julie's features were quivering with the effort she was making to keep back her tears.

"A pinch of poison . . . and all was over. And the person who did it will, perhaps, lead a happy life, because nobody knows who that person is. Though I'm pretty sure he was amongst us an hour ago."

"Stop!" Julie implored, wringing her hands. The tears were flowing freely now.

But the Inspector knew where he was getting. He went

on in a low voice, lingering on each word. There was very little play-acting in it; he was genuinely affected by the emotional atmosphere of the little room. A picture of the short, sturdy harbour-master was hovering before his eyes as he conjured up the past.

"Now he's dead and gone, he has only one friend left. Myself! Fighting a lone hand to discover the truth and prevent the murderer from getting off scot free." Julie had broken down completely; she was sobbing violently as he went on. "But all the people who know anything about poor Joris's death refuse to speak. And lie so persistently that one can't help suspecting that every one of them has something to hide, that they're all accomplices."

"That's not true!" Julie burst out.

Louis was looking more and more uncomfortable. He filled up his glass, and the Inspector's as well.

"Louis, to begin with, keeps mum."

Through her tears Julie gazed anxiously at her brother, struck by the truth of the remark.

"He knows something. I believe he knows a great deal. Is he afraid of the murderer? Has he something on his conscience?"

"Louis!" Julie cried reproachfully.

But Louis looked away; his eyes hardened.

"Tell him it's not true, Louis. Please!"

"Dunno what the Inspector's gettin' at," Louis muttered. But he was so flustered that he rose from his seat.

"Louis is the biggest liar of the lot. He pretends not to know that Norwegian; and I'm certain he knows him. He pretends to have no dealings with the mayor, and I find him in the mayor's house, giving him a hiding."

The ghost of a smile flickered on the ex-convict's lips. But Julie was not appeased.

"Is that true, Louis?" He made no reply; she seized his arm. "Why don't you speak out? I *know* you haven't done anything wrong."

He shook his arm free. All the same, he seemed impressed. Was his resistance breaking down? Without giving him time to collect himself, Maigret went on:

"Yes, and very likely all that's needed to break this tissue of lies is just a grain of truth, a tiny scrap of information."

No. For all his sister's entreating look, Louis merely gave his shoulders a great heave, like a giant shaking off the toils of pygmies, and growled:

"I don't know nothing."

"Why won't you speak?" Julie's tone was severe; her suspicion was aroused at last.

"I don't know nothing."

"The Inspector says . . ."

"Nothing, I tell you."

"Listen, Louis. I've always trusted you. You know that. And I've stood up for you, even to Captain Joris." An unlucky remark. She blushed, and made haste to change the subject. "Do please tell the Inspector all you know. I'm sick and tired of . . . of everything. And I won't stay in this house any longer, all by myself."

"Stop, Julie!" Louis murmured. "That's enough."

"What do you want him to tell you, Inspector?"

"Two things. Who Martineau is. And why the mayor lets himself be knocked about."

"Do you hear, Louis? It's nothing so very terrible."

"I don't know nothing."

Her anger rose.

"Louis, take care! I'll end by believing . . ."

The fire droned on monotonously, the clock ticked languidly, trailing glints of lamplight on its swaying pendulum.

. . . And Louis looked absurdly out of place, with his huge bulk, his crooked head and shoulder—like some cave-man who had blundered into a trim and tidy cottage kitchen. He didn't seem to know what to do with his clumsy limbs, where to rest his shifty gaze.

"You *must* speak, Louis."

"I got nothing to say." His hand moved towards the bottle. She snatched it away.

"No! You've drunk quite enough already."

Her nerves were frayed to breaking-point. She dimly realized a crucial moment had come; hoped against hope the word would now be spoken that would clear up everything.

"Louis, this man—the Norwegian . . . Isn't he the gentleman that was after buying the *Saint Michel* and said he was going to give you a job as skipper?"

An emphatic "No!"

"Then—who is he? He's never been seen in these parts before. And we don't have strangers coming here in winter."

"Dunno."

But she wouldn't give in, and her woman's wit suggested a new line of attack.

"The mayor's always had a down on you. Is it true you had dinner with him this evening?"

"It's true."

She was trembling with impatience.

"But . . . For heaven's sake, Louis, tell me what it means. You *must*. Or I'll begin to think that . . ." Her voice broke. She was at the end of her tether. She stared helplessly at the old familiar things: the armchair, the range, the wall-clock, a glass jar painted with gaudy flowers.

"You were fond of the Captain. I know it. You've told me so heaps of times, and if you had a row with him it was because . . .' She realized this wanted clearing up. "I must

explain, sir. I wouldn't like you to have wrong ideas. My brother really liked Captain Joris. And the Captain liked him too. Only they had—well, it wasn't exactly a row. Louis, you see, goes sort of crazy when he has money in his pocket. He just flings it away regardless. The Captain knew he used to come to me for help when he'd spent it all. So one day he gave him a good dressing-down about it. That's all. And that's why, later on, he forbade him to come to this house. To prevent him cadging money from me. But he always said that Louis was a decent fellow at bottom, only he was weak."

"And Louis," Maigret said deliberately, "may have known that, if Joris died, you'd inherit three hundred thousand francs."

It happened so quickly that the Inspector nearly got the worst of it. Julie screamed. Louis fell furiously upon Maigret, belaboured him with his fists, then made a grab at his throat.

Just in time the Inspector's arm shot up, seized the man's wrist, and slowly but surely twisted it behind his back.

"Hands off!"

Julie had backed to the wall, covering her eyes with her arm, whimpering with terror. "Stop, Louis! Stop!"

Maigret released the man's arm.

"Now, Louis," he said peremptorily. "Out with it!"

"I've nothing to say."

"I've a good mind to arrest you."

"Please yourself."

"Inspector, sir," Julie wailed. "Please don't do that. Oh Louis, I beg you, for heaven's sake, speak out."

The two men were standing by the door. Louis swung round. His cheeks were blazing red, his eyes glowing, his lips twisted in a curious grimace. He stretched out his

arm towards his sister's shoulder in a sudden gesture of affection.

"Julie dear, I swear to you . . ."

"Don't touch me!"

He hesitated, took a step towards the hall, turned round again.

"Listen, Julie!"

"No. Go away!"

He walked slowly down the hall, behind Maigret; stopped at the door, thought for a moment of turning back—but gave it up. The door closed behind them. It opened again when they had taken only a few steps through the rain-swept darkness. They saw Julie's form outlined against the light; heard her call "Louis!"

Too late. Side by side the two men trudged towards the night-bound harbour. Within a few seconds the rain-squall had drenched them to the skin. From a pool of shadows a voice barked:

"That you, Louis?"

Lannec, on the *Saint Michel*, had heard their footsteps. His head bobbed up through the hatchway. Evidently he knew that Louis was not alone, for he went on in Low Breton:

"Jump on the fo'c'sle and we'll be off."

Maigret had understood. The night was so black that he could not see where the schooner's deck began and the quay-side ended. His companion showed as a dark vacillating mass, his shoulders glistening under the downpour. He waited.

Chapter X

ON BOARD THE *SAINT MICHEL*

LOUIS glanced towards the outer darkness of the sea; then, furtively, at Maigret. At last, shrugging his shoulders, he grunted to the Inspector:

"Coming on board?"

Maigret noticed that Lannec had something in his hand that looked like a rope's end. Watching him from the corner of an eye, he saw him pass it once round a bollard and bring it back on board. Which meant that the *Saint Michel* was made fast in such a way that he could cast off at a moment's notice without anyone's going ashore.

Maigret said nothing. He knew that he was playing a lone hand. Julie was a good three hundred yards away; he pictured her still sobbing in the kitchen. Besides her there was no one nearer than the people in the *Sailors' Rest*, half asleep by now in its comfortable warmth.

He stepped upon the bulwarks, then jumped down on to the deck. Despite the breakwaters, the sea was running high in the outer harbour and the *Saint Michel* pitching heavily.

The deck was in darkness but for some broken gleams of light from streaming spars. A dim form showed on the fo'c'sle: the captain, staring dumbfounded at the intruder. He wore rubber thigh-boots, an oilskin, a sou'wester. He was still holding the hawser.

All seemed waiting for something to happen. None was disposed to make the first move. Maigret could feel their eyes intent on him, and realized what a queer bird he must

seem to them in his overcoat with a velvet collar, and the bowler hat he was grasping firmly to prevent it being blown away.

"You can't sail tonight," he said.

No protest. But a furtive exchange of glances between the skipper and Louis, meaning: "We'll sail all the same, eh?" and "Better not."

The gusts were so violent that it was almost impossible to remain on deck. Taking the lead again, Maigret walked to the hatchway, whose whereabouts he remembered.

"We'll have a talk. Tell the other man to join us."

He preferred to leave no one on deck. The four men clambered down the steep-pitched ladder. Oilskins and gum-boots were discarded. The lamp was lit. On the table lay a greasy chart, criss-crossed with pencil-marks. Beside it some empty glasses.

Lannec put two lumps of coal into the little stove. Then he gazed obliquely at his visitor, doubtful whether to propose a drink. The third man, Célestin, retreated to a corner, feeling ill at ease; it didn't seem natural his being asked down into the cabin.

The attitude of all three men made one thing perfectly clear: none of them was willing to speak out, because none of them knew exactly how things stood. The skipper kept shooting questioning glances at Louis, who gloomed back at him helplessly.

It looked as if a long preliminary explanation would be needed to start the ball rolling.

Lannec cleared his throat noisily and growled:

"Have you thought it over?"

Maigret, seated on a wooden bench, his elbows on the table, was fingering an empty tumbler. The glass was so thick as to be almost opaque.

Louis, who was standing, had to stoop to avoid touching the roof with his head. To keep himself in countenance, Lannec was fumbling with something in the cupboard.

"Thought what over?" Maigret enquired.

"I don't know what your powers are. But I do know this: that I take my orders only from the shipping authorities. It's for them to decide whether a ship leaves port or not."

"Well?"

"You're stopping me from leaving Ouistreham. I've cargo to take on at La Rochelle, and there's a penalty for every day I'm overdue."

An unpromising beginning, this; on a grave, semi-official note. But Maigret was getting used to this sort of thing. Hadn't the mayor taken much the same line? And Martineau, with his allusions to his consul.

He took a deep breath, then darted a quick glance at the three men. His eyes were twinkling.

"Don't try to come the sea-lawyer over me!" he said in Breton. "What about a drink?"

It might have fallen flat. The old sailor merely gaped at Maigret. Louis, however, visibly unstiffened. Lannec, still on his guard, asked:

"Are you a Breton?"

"Not quite. My home town's on the Loire. But I went to school at Nantes."

Disdainful looks. The scorn of the true-born, seafaring Breton for the inlander, and especially for the half-caste Bretons of the Nantes district.

"Got any more of the Hollands we had the other day?"

Lannec fetched the bottle and filled the glasses slowly, glad to have something to occupy him. He was still uncertain what line to take. Bluff and burly, his bowler well back on

his head, puffing at his pipe, Maigret seemed to have made himself quite at home in the little cabin.

"Why not sit down, Louis?"

Louis complied. The ice wasn't broken yet, but now the men's constraint came from a different cause: from not being able to respond to Maigret's geniality in kind. The trouble was, they had to be on their guard.

"Here's luck, my lads! And you can't deny that by stopping you from sailing on a filthy night like this I'm doing you a good turn."

"If it wasn't for the gut. . . ." Lannec took a deep swig of his gin. "Once we're clear of that it's all right. But the river runs at the hell of a pace, and what with the current and the sand-banks, it takes some doing, getting through the gut. Every year there's some ships run aground there."

"The *Saint Michel*'s never been in trouble, eh?"

Lannec hastily touched wood. From his corner Célestin growled an angry protest.

"Not she! She's a daisy; there ain't another like her. Listen to this! Last year she ran aground in a thick fog on the English coast. A rocky shore and a big sea running. Any other ship'd have broken up. Well, when the tide rose she just floated off. Hadn't even to go into dry dock."

So long as he kept to that topic, Maigret knew the going would be good. But he was not out to listen to sea-talk all night. . . . Water was coming in from the deck, trickling down the ladder; steam rising from the men's rain-soaked clothing. And, not to put too fine a point on it, the heaving of the ship, which now and again bumped heavily against the piles, was telling on the Inspector's innards.

"She'll make a good private yacht," he remarked with seeming casualness.

Lannec gave a slight start.

"Aye, she *could* be made into a fine yacht," he amended. "Only the deck to change. And cut down her canvas a bit, especially up aloft."

"Has the Norwegian clinched the deal?"

Lannec shot a quick glance at Louis. Louis sighed. The two men would have given much for a few seconds' private talk together. What had Louis divulged? The skipper had no idea what line to take.

Louis had a hang-dog air. He knew what was coming. In a proper jam they were! And no way of passing the word to Lannec. Trouble brewing, whatever way one looked at it. The best thing was to drink. He poured himself out a glass of Hollands, swallowed it at a gulp and faced up to the Inspector. But there was little hostility in his manner; merely resignation.

"What Norwegian?"

"Well, the Norwegian who isn't a real Norwegian. That chap Martineau. It can't have been at Tromsö that he saw the *Saint Michel*, as she's never gone so far north."

"Not but what she couldn't," the skipper said. "She's good for a voyage to Archangel any day o' the year."

"When's he taking delivery?"

From his corner the old sailor emitted a derisive grunt. The derision was not aimed at Maigret, but at the ship's company at large—himself included. Lannec found nothing better than a lame rejoinder:

"Don't know what you're talking about."

Maigret's response was a playful dig in the ribs.

"Tell that to the marines! Now look here, my lads! Stop pulling those long faces at me, like mourners at a funeral—or the damned pig-headed Bretons you are. Martineau's said he'll buy the schooner. Has he put through

the deal or not?" He had an inspiration. "Just show me the crew-list."

One up to him! He read it in their faces.

"Don't know where I've stowed it."

"Lannec, I told you not to play the fool. Hand over that document, damn your eyes!"

He had struck the right note—a mixture of truculence and cordiality. The skipper went to the cupboard, fished out a mouldy attaché-case. It contained official documents and business letters headed with the titles of shipbrokers' firms.

There was also a big brand-new yellow folder in which had been inserted some imposing-looking foolscap sheets, the crew-list. Dated September 11—i.e. five days previous to the disappearance of Captain Joris.

Schooner Saint Michel. *270 Tons Gross. Licensed for Coastal Navigation. Owner: Louis Legrand, Port-en-Bessin. Master: Yves Lannec. Deck-hand: Célestin Grollet.*

Louis poured himself out another glass. Lannec looked down, embarrassed.

"Aha! So you're the owner of this ship at present, Louis?"

No answer. In the corner Célestin had started munching a quid of black tobacco.

"Listen to me, my lads. It's no use beating about the bush. I can see through a brick wall as well as the next man. Though I mayn't know much about the sea, I do know this—that Louis hasn't a penny to his name. Well, a ship like this costs at least a hundred and fifty thousand francs."

"More," Lannec cut in. "Wouldn't a sold her at that price."

"Right! Say, two hundred thousand. It's clear that Louis has bought her for someone else. Let's say, for

Martineau. For some reason or other, Martineau doesn't want it known he owns the schooner. . . . Here's luck!"

Célestin shook his shoulders as if the whole proceedings disgusted him profoundly.

"Was Martineau at Fécamp on the eleventh of September, when the sale took place?"

Sour looks all round. Louis picked up the quid of tobacco which was lying on the table and took a bite, while Célestin spattered the cabin floor with clots of brownish spittle.

There was a break in the conversation. The lamp had begun to smoke, the oil had run out, and the can was on deck. Lannec came back soaked through. For a minute or two the cabin was in darkness. When the lamp was lit again everyone was in the same place as before.

"Martineau was there, I'm positive of that. The ship was bought in Louis's name, but it was agreed that Lannec stayed with her; perhaps for good, perhaps for a short time."

"Only for a while."

"Exactly. I'd guessed as much. Long enough to use the *Saint Michel* for a rather queer sort of cruise." Lannec rose from his seat, so flustered that he bit through his cigarette. "You came to Ouistreham," Maigret went on. "On the night of the sixteenth the *Saint Michel* was moored in the outer harbour, ready to go to sea. Where was Martineau?" The skipper sat down again, despondent but determined not to speak. "On the morning of the sixteenth the *Saint Michel* sailed. Who was her passenger? Was Martineau still on board? Was Joris with you?"

Maigret did not put his questions in the tone of an examining magistrate; not even in that of a police officer. His manner was completely cordial, there was a humorous twinkle in his eye. He might have been playing a guessing game at a family party.

"You went to England. Then you set a course for Holland. Was it there that Martineau and Joris left the ship? For they certainly went farther north. To Norway, I've every reason to believe."

Louis emitted a sort of growl.

"What did you say?"

"That you'll never find out. . . ."

"Was Joris already wounded when he came on board? Or was he wounded during the voyage, or later on, in Norway?" He knew better than to expect an answer, and went on at once: "The three of you carried on with your coasting business as before. But you kept to the north coast. You were awaiting a letter or telegram fixing a meeting-place. Last week you were in Fécamp, the port where Martineau first got in touch with you. There Louis learnt that Captain Joris had been found in Paris, in a queer state, and was being brought back to Ouistreham. Louis came here by train. Found no one in the Captain's house. Left a note for his sister and went back to Fécamp."

Maigret heaved a sigh, paused to relight his pipe.

"Well, we're getting near the end of the story. Martineau was at Fécamp and you brought him here with you. But you dropped him at the entrance of the harbour. Which proves he didn't want to be seen. Louis and he arranged to meet on the dredger. . . . Here's the best!"

He helped himself and drained his glass. The three men watched him apathetically.

"When all's said and done, the only thing I'd like to know is what Louis was up to when he went to see the mayor—while Martineau was driving towards Paris. Queer doings anyhow—bashing-in the face of a man who has the reputation of being a bit high hat, especially in his dealings with common folk like you and me."

Louis couldn't repress a grin of satisfaction at this reminder of his prowess.

"So that's how it stands, my lads. Try and ram it into those thick heads of yours that sooner or later we'll get to the bottom of it all. Don't you think it would be better to come out with it right away?"

Maigret tapped his pipe out against his heel to empty it; then started refilling it. Célestin was fast asleep. Snoring, his mouth wide open. Louis, his head cocked on one side, was staring at the dirty floor. Lannec was vainly trying to catch his eye, hoping to be given a lead. At last he muttered:

"We've nothing to tell you."

A crash on the deck. As if some heavy object had dropped on it. Maigret started. Louis put his head and shoulders through the hatchway, his legs remaining visible along the ladder. Had he gone right up on deck, the Inspector would have followed.

For at most half a minute Louis remained thus. There was no sound except the patter of the rain on the deck, the creak of tackle. Then he climbed down again, water streaming down his cheeks, his wet hair plastered on his forehead. He vouchsafed no explanation.

"What was it?"

"A block."

"How did it make that noise?"

"Fetched up against the bulwarks."

The skipper replenished the stove. Did he believe Louis's explanation? In any case, Louis made no response to his looks of anxious enquiry. He shook Célestin's shoulder.

"Go and bend on the mizzen-sheet."

The seaman rubbed his eyes. The order had to be repeated twice before it soaked into his sleep-fuddled brain. Then he got into his oilskin and sou'wester and dragged himself

up the ladder, furious at being bundled out of the warm cabin into the wind and rain.

They could hear his wooden clogs clattering on the deck overhead as he moved to and fro. Louis helped himself to a drink, his sixth or seventh; but drink apparently took no effect on him. No change had come over the coarse, rather bloated face, with the large shallow eyes and the look of a born drifter, one of life's misfits.

"Well, what about it, Louis?"

"About what?"

"Don't play the fool! You know what I mean. Don't you realize you're up against it? For one thing, you've your past against you. You've served a term. No getting away from that. Then there's the purchase of this ship, when you hadn't a sou. Then there's the fact that Joris showed you the door because you were always sponging on Julie. And the fact that the *Saint Michel* was here on the night he was kidnapped. You were here, too, on the day he was poisoned. And your sister's inherited three hundred thousand francs from him."

The words might have fallen on deaf ears. Louis's eyes were perfectly expressionless. Vacant as a doll's eyes; staring at the wall in front of him.

"What's he up to on deck?" Lannec sounded worried. He stared at the half-open hatch through which water was streaming in, forming a puddle on the floor.

Maigret had not drunk much. Enough, however, to bring the blood to his head, especially in this stuffy atmosphere. Enough, too, vaguely to stimulate his imagination.

He fell to picturing the life of these three men, whom he now knew fairly well, in this small universe of theirs, the *Saint Michel*.

Always a bottle and some dirty glasses on the table. One

man sprawling in his bunk, fully dressed most of the time. The others on deck, the tramp of clogs or sea-boots resounding overhead. And always that steady, muffled throbbing of the sea. The binnacle with its little light. Another lamp swaying on the mizzen-mast.

He pictured them peering into the darkness, watching for the far-off gleam of a lighthouse. Then on the wharves, unloading cargo. Two or three days of leisure, spent in pubs, all alike in every port. . . .

Maigret pricked up his ears. There were sounds he couldn't account for overhead. . . . The alarm-clock hung on the wall said three o'clock. Louis looked as if he too were drowsing off. The bottle was almost empty.

Yawning, Lannec fumbled in his pocket for cigarettes. . . .

Maigret fell to thinking of the night when Joris disappeared. Might they not have spent it in this stuffy, overheated cabin, noisome with the smells of coal-tar and unkempt humanity? And perhaps he too had drunk with them, struggled to fight down sleep.

There was no mistaking now the sounds on deck; they were men's voices. But, blurred by the gale, they reached the cabin as an unintelligible murmur.

Maigret rose, frowning. Lannec, he saw, was filling his glass again; Louis's eyes were almost closed, his chin sunk on his chest.

Maigret took out his revolver and began to climb the ladder.

It was almost vertical, and the hatchway only just wide enough for a man's body to pass. The Inspector was bulkier than the average.

So he never had even a sporting chance. No sooner had his head emerged above the deck than a gag was slipped across his mouth and knotted tightly behind his head. Dirty work—by Célestin and another deck-hand, most likely.

Meanwhile someone wrenched his revolver from his right hand and tied his wrists together behind his back.

He lashed out backwards with his foot; hit something which felt like a face. But then a rope coiled round his legs.

"Heave away!" Louis's voice. Dull, phlegmatic as ever.

That was the hardest part. The Inspector was no light weight. From below they pushed him, while the men above hauled at his shoulders.

Rain was falling in torrents, the wind roaring up the canal with redoubled violence.

The masthead light had been put out, but Maigret thought he could distinguish the forms of four men. But the abrupt change from a warm lighted room to bitter cold and darkness had numbed his senses.

"One. Two. Three. Hoist!"

Like a sack of flour he was heaved up from the deck, swung across the bulwarks, and dumped on the slimy cobbles of the wharf.

Louis stepped on shore and tested the knots one by one. For a moment the Inspector glimpsed the ex-convict's face quite close to his. He had an impression that it had a bored, dejected look, as if he were engaged in a task that went against the grain.

"Tell my sister . . ." he began.

Tell her what? He didn't know himself. From the schooner came sounds of hurrying feet, creaking pulleys, flapping canvas, muttered orders. The jibs were unfurled. The mainsail crept slowly up its mast.

"Tell her, please, that I'll see her again one day. You, too, perhaps."

He jumped back on to the deck. Maigret was lying with his eyes towards the sea. A lantern on a halyard ran up to the masthead. A dark form moved beside the tiller.

"Cast off!"

Hauled in on board, the rope slipped off the bollard. The jibs flapped and the bow paid off. The schooner almost swung completely round, caught by the full force of the squall. Just in time a push at the tiller brought her up into the wind. For a while the ship seemed to hesitate, as if feeling for her course. Then suddenly, heeling over, she shot between the jetties.

A black mass in the darkness. A tiny glimmer of light on the deck and another high up on the mast, a lone star wandering in a stormy sky.

Maigret couldn't move. He lay helpless in a pool of water—on the edge of an abyss of darkness.

He was thinking: Probably they've finished off the bottle of Hollands by now. Dutch courage. The skipper's put a couple of lumps of coal on the fire. One man at the helm. The other two sprawling in their wet bunks.

There may have been one salty drop amongst the raindrops streaming down the Inspector's cheeks. What a come-down for a mighty man of valour, the most robust, intrepid representative of no mean Force, the *Police Judiciaire*, to spend an abject night, trussed up like a bale of piece-goods, on the cobbles of a little wharf!

Had it been possible for him to turn, he would have seen the small wooden porch of the *Sailors' Rest*, dark and deserted now.

CHAPTER XI

THE SAND-BANK

THE tide was ebbing fast. Maigret heard the surf breaking on the end of the breakwater; then, more faintly, receding down the sands.

With the ebb the wind fell, as usually happens. The shafts of rain lost their sting, and by the time the lowering clouds were greying with the dawn, the downpour of the night had changed to a thin, but still icier, drizzle.

Little by little, objects were emerging from the murk; slender black lines took form across the greyness—the slanted masts of fishing-smacks that were lying stranded on the mud-flats of the outer harbour.

Far away inland a cow mooed. A church-bell started ringing, with discreetly gentle chimes, for seven o'clock Low Mass.

But Maigret knew he would have to wait quite a while yet. The churchgoers wouldn't come this way; nor would the lock-keepers show up before high water. There was always the chance a fisherman might walk by; but, considering the weather, that hope, too, seemed pretty remote.

Shivering in his sodden clothes, Maigret pictured enviously all the beds of Ouistreham: stout oak beds straddled by fat eiderdowns, and people sleeping in them the sleep of the just, between soft warm blankets. With his mind's eye he saw them blinking at the grey glimmer of dawn upon the panes, then settling down for another forty winks before venturing their bare feet on the cold floor.

Was Sergeant Lucas, too, in bed? Not likely, for in that case all that had happened was quite inexplicable.

Maigret's theory of it was this. Martineau had somehow or other managed to put Lucas out of action. Quite possibly by trussing him up too. Then he had come to the *Saint Michel*. Hearing the Inspector's voice, he had hung about till somebody showed up. Probably when Louis had put his head through the hatchway he'd whispered instructions to him, or given him a note.

The rest was child's-play. A noise on deck. Célestin sent up to see. A conversation between the two men to lure Maigret up the ladder. When he was half-way up, the men on deck had gagged him while those below secured his legs.

By now the schooner must be outside territorial waters, which end three miles from the coast. Except in the unlikely event of her putting in at another French port, Maigret could take no steps to intercept her.

He kept quite still. He had noticed that each time he moved it let more water in beneath his overcoat.

His ear was resting on the ground and he could account for all the sounds that came to it; for instance, the clank of the pump in Joris's yard.

So Julie was up. She had gone out in her clogs to fetch the water for her morning wash. But she wasn't likely to leave the premises. It was still rather dark; probably she'd lit the lamp in the kitchen.

Footsteps. Someone crossing the bridge. Walking slowly. The footsteps approached, along the edge of the jetty. Something—it sounded like a coil of rope—was thrown down into a row-boat alongside.

Probably a fisherman. With an effort Maigret heaved himself over, and saw the man, twenty yards away, about to

climb down the iron ladder leading to the water. In spite of the gag, he managed to utter a weak cry.

The fisherman looked round, noticed the black mass lying on the ground, and eyed it suspiciously for some moments before coming up to investigate.

"Whatcher doing there?" he began. Then, vaguely remembering something he'd heard about the correct procedure when confronted by a crime, he drew back. "I guess I'd better go and fetch the police."

However, he removed the gag. After some talk the Inspector succeeded in persuading him—though he still had misgivings—to unfasten the ropes as well. The fisherman had some hard words for the "feller what made these here knots."

Up at the pub the waitress was opening the shutters. Though the gale had abated, the sea was still running high, but without the thunderous roar of the night that had just ended. A huge wave swept in from the open sea, rising on the sand-bank to a solid wall of water ten feet high, and broke with a prodigious crash that seemed to shake the earth.

The fisherman, a wizened old seadog with a bushy beard, still showed signs of compunction.

"Gotta inform the police, you know."

"But I told you just now that I'm a police officer myself, a sort of plain-clothes policeman."

"Aye, a plain-clothes policeman, so you says." He was still worried, doubtful what to do.

As he pondered, his gaze roved seawards, scanning the horizon. Suddenly it came to rest on a point to the right of the jetty. He turned and stared at Maigret with a look of consternation.

"What's up?"

The fisherman was too perturbed to answer, and Maigret

only understood when he too had swept his gaze round the horizon.

It was near low water, and the bay showed as a vast stretch of golden sand extending over a mile out, edged by a ribbon of foam.

To the right of the jetty, little more than half a mile away, a boat had run aground, half of her resting on the sand, the other half lashed by gigantic waves. Two masts, one with a square lantern. A Paimpol schooner, judging by her build. Beyond all doubt, the *Saint Michel*.

In that direction all was grey, the skyline indistinguishable from the sea. Against the greyness, a black slanting mass: the schooner's hull.

"Reckon they sailed too late after the full," remarked the fisherman.

"Does that happen often?"

"Aye, it's happened afore now. Weren't enough water at the gut. And the current from the Orne pushed 'em agin the bank."

A veil of driven rain and spindrift lay across the sea, giving a strangely forlorn remoteness to the scene. Still, when one saw the schooner almost on dry land, it was difficult to believe that those on board had faced any real danger.

But when she had put out, the sea had still been breaking at the foot of the dunes. Ten ranks of mountainous waves between her and the sand-bar.

"Got to tell the harbour-master."

A trivial detail. Unthinkingly the man started off towards Joris's cottage. Then, muttering something, he swung round and walked in the opposite direction.

Meanwhile, however, the wreck had been observed by others, perhaps from the church porch. Captain Delcourt with three other men came bustling up. Delcourt still seemed

half asleep. He shook hands absent-mindedly, failed to notice that Maigret looked like a drowned rat.

"I warned them not to do it."

"Ah, so they told you they were leaving last night."

"Well, when I saw that they had moored down here I guessed that they weren't going to wait for the next tide, and I advised the skipper to beware of the current."

Everyone moved down to the beach. It was heavy going. They had to wade through patches of water a foot deep; their boots sank into the wet sand.

"Are they in any danger?" Maigret asked.

"Oh, they're off the ship already. Or else they'd be on the look-out for us, and they'd have run up the distress signal." He suddenly looked worried. "Wait a bit, though! They hadn't got their boat with them. You remember? After that steamer brought it in, we kept it in the dock."

"Well?"

"It means they must have swum ashore. Or else . . ."

Delcourt was uneasy. There were several queer features about the wreck.

"What puzzles me," he said, "is why they didn't shore up the schooner, to prevent her heeling over. Unless she heeled over the moment she struck. It's devilish odd in any case!"

On a close-up view the *Saint Michel* was a dismal sight. Her keel was painted a livid green, her hull crusted with barnacles. The men who had come with Delcourt prowled round the schooner, looking for signs of injury. None was found.

"It's just an ordinary grounding."

"No damage done?"

"No. At next high water a tug will pull her off easily enough. Only I still don't understand . . ."

"What don't you understand?"

"Why they abandoned ship. It's not like them to get the wind up. And they know the schooner's stoutly built. You can see that for yourself. . . . Hi there, Jean-Baptiste! Go and fetch a ladder."

Even with the list, the deck was well above their heads.

"Don't need a ladder, sir."

A broken shroud was hanging over the side. The man swarmed up it, dangled a moment in mid-air, then swung himself on to the deck. Some minutes later he let down a ladder.

"Anyone on board?"

"Not a soul."

Some miles away along the coast Maigret could see the houses of Dives and factory smoke-stacks; and, farther on, less clearly, Cabourg, Houlgate, and the cliffs behind which lay Deauville and Trouville. "I suppose I'd better have a look on board," he murmured.

He scrambled up the ladder. Once on board, the slope of the deck made him feel quite dizzy, more squeamish than if the ship had been rolling heavily. Broken glass strewed the cabin floor. Cupboard doors stood open.

The harbour-master was in a quandary. The ship was not his. Dare he take the responsibility of sending to Trouville for a tug and having her refloated?

"If she stays here for another tide she'll be a total wreck," he muttered.

"In that case, do all that can be done to save her. You can say you acted on my instructions."

Meanwhile the eyes of the men on board had swung round towards the empty dunes; it almost looked as if they expected to see the crew of the *Saint Michel* there, watching their operations. Never had the sense of vague foreboding been so pronounced as it was now. . . .

On his way back to Ouistreham Maigret passed a steady stream of men and children hurrying down to the beach. On the outskirts of the harbour Julie buttonholed him.

"Is it true? Have they been wrecked?"

"No. They only ran aground. There's no need to fear for a good swimmer like your brother."

"Where is he?"

A melancholy business; a jig-saw puzzle where the pieces didn't match. As Maigret was walking by his hotel the proprietor hailed him.

"Your two friends aren't down yet. Shall I wake them?"

"Don't bother. I'll go myself."

He went upstairs to Lucas's room. Lucas was lying on his bed, tied up almost as tightly as Maigret had been.

"Let me explain . . ."

"No need. Come along!"

"Any fresh developments? . . . But you're soaked through. You look done in!"

Maigret went with him to the post-office, which was opposite the church, at the end of the village. Everyone who could get away was hurrying down to the beach; the others were standing on their doorsteps.

"So you'd no chance of resisting him?"

"No. We were going up to bed. He was behind me on the stairs. Suddenly he grabbed my legs. It all happened in a flash. I hadn't a chance of hitting back. . . . Have you seen him?"

Maigret created quite a sensation. He looked as if he'd been standing all night up to his neck in water. Impossible to write; the water trickled down his arms on to the paper.

"You write, Lucas. Wires to all police stations and mayors

in the district. Dives, Cabourg, Houlgate. Places south, as well. Luc-sur-Mer, Lion, Coutances. Study the map. Even the smallest villages within ten miles from the sea.

"Descriptions of four men. Louis, Martineau, Captain Lannec, that old codger they call Célestin.

"After sending off the telegrams, ring up the nearest towns and villages; that'll save time."

He left Lucas busy writing out the wires, and crossed to a small pub facing the post-office. There he gulped down a hot grog while the village children flattened their noses against the panes, watching him.

All Ouistreham was humming with excitement. Everyone gazing, or walking, seawards. The wildest rumours were afloat.

On the road Maigret encountered his rescuer, the old fisherman.

"Look here, my man! I hope you haven't been telling . . ."

"I said as how I'd found you," the man replied indifferently.

The Inspector gave him twenty francs, and went to the hotel to change. He was feeling dithery, hot and cold all over. He had dark pouches under his eyes, a thick growth of bristles on his chin.

Yet, tired as he was, his brain was active. Even more so than usual. He managed to take note of all he saw, answer people and put questions to them, without once losing grip of the ordered sequence of his thoughts.

It was nearly nine when he returned to the post-office. Lucas was near the end of his telephone calls. The telegrams had already been despatched. All police stations reported that none of the persons wanted had been traced so far. Maigret turned to the telephone operator.

"Has Monsieur Grandmaison put through a call?"

"Yes, an hour ago. To Paris."

She gave him the number. He looked it up in the directory; it was a school, the *Collège Stanislas.*

"Does the mayor often call that number?"

"Fairly often. I think his son's there."

"Ah yes, he has a son. The boy's about fifteen, isn't he?"

"I believe so. I've never seen him."

"Hasn't Monsieur Grandmaison rung up Caen?"

"No, but he had a call from there. From a member of his family, or his office staff; from his own house, anyhow."

The telegraph began clicking. A message for the harbourmaster: "*Tug* Athos *arriving noon. Trouville Harbour Office.*"

At last a telephone call from Caen police station. "Madame Grandmaison reached Caen at 4 a.m. Slept at her house in the Rue du Four. She's just left in her car for Ouistreham."

When Maigret, from the harbour, looked out to sea, the tide had gone out so far that the stranded schooner lay midway between the sea-line and the dunes. Captain Delcourt was scowling. Everyone was gazing anxiously at the horizon.

For there was no mistaking the signs. The wind had fallen with the ebb, but with the turn of the tide it would start blowing again, and harder than ever. The sullen grey sky and the colour of the water, a livid green, were sure precursors of a gale.

"Has anyone seen the mayor?"

"His maid was here just now. He'd asked her to say he's ill and leaves everything to me."

Maigret trudged uphill to the mayor's house, his hands thrust in his overcoat pockets. He rang. Ten minutes passed before the door opened.

The maid began to say something. Brushing her aside, he walked straight in. His manner was so determined that she dared not protest, and merely hurried ahead of him to the study door. There she announced in a loud voice:

"The Inspector's here, sir."

The bruises on the mayor's face showed up much more than on the previous night, being blue instead of red. A big coal fire was burning in the fireplace.

Monsieur Grandmaison's expression conveyed a firm resolve not to speak; indeed, wholly to ignore his visitor's presence. Maigret took a similar line. After depositing his coat beside his hat, which he had placed on a chair on entering, he planted himself squarely on the hearthrug, with his back to the fire and the air of a man whose only care is to get warm. He puffed vigorously at his pipe.

"Well, well"—he sounded as if he were talking to himself —"it's a relief to know the enquiry will be over by tonight."

The mayor made a slight movement, quickly repressed. He picked up a newspaper beside his chair and pretended to read it.

"I'm afraid, by the way, we may have to go to Caen, and you'll have to come with us."

"To Caen?" Monsieur Grandmaison looked up, puckering his brows.

"Yes. I really should have let you know sooner. It would have saved Madame Grandmaison the trouble of a needless journey here."

"I fail to see what my wife . . ."

" . . . has to do with it," Maigret completed the remark. "So do I, for that matter!"

His pipe had gone out. He went to the desk, took a box of matches and lit it again.

"Anyhow, that's a mere detail," he said in a more casual tone, "as everything's to be cleared up quite soon. By the way, do you know who the present owner of the *Saint Michel* is? Louis, of all people! The nominal owner, anyhow. Probably he's only a man of straw and the real owner's a

man called Martineau. . . . Wonder if they'll succeed in towing her off the sand-bank?"

The mayor was obviously trying to discern what lay behind these desultory remarks. But he refrained from speaking; especially from putting questions.

"Now you can see how it all hangs together. Louis bought the *Saint Michel* for Martineau five days before Joris disappeared. She's the only ship that left Port Ouistreham immediately after his disappearance, and she called in at British and Dutch ports before returning to France. Now, there are certainly coasting-boats of the same type plying between Holland and Norway. Before he went to Paris with his skull patched up, Captain Joris was taken to Norway."

The mayor was all attention now.

"That's not all. Martineau came back to Fécamp when the *Saint Michel* was there. Louis, who acts as his factotum, was here some hours before Joris's death. The *Saint Michel* followed up a little later, with Martineau on board. Last night he tried to make a getaway, along with the men I ordered to stay here at my disposal. With one exception —you."

Maigret paused, then added with a sigh:

"Two facts are still unexplained. Why Martineau returned and tried to go to Paris. And why you rang up your wife and told her to come home at once."

"I hope you're not trying to imply . . ."

"I'm not implying—anything! . . . Hullo! There's a car coming. I'll bet you what you like it's Madame Grandmaison. Would you be good enough not to tell her anything?"

A ring at the front door. Footsteps in the hall. Some whispered talk. Then the maid peeped in through the half-

open door. Why did she say nothing? Why was she casting nervous glances at the master of the house?

"Well? What is it?" he asked impatiently.

"I thought I'd better . . ."

The Inspector pushed past her. In the hall was only a chauffeur in uniform. Maigret went straight to the point.

"So you lost Madame Grandmaison on the way here?" he asked.

"Well, sir, she . . . she . . ."

"Where did she get down?"

"At the Deauville turning. She was feeling ill."

In the study the mayor was already on his feet, breathing heavily, a stern look on his face.

"Wait for me!" he shouted to the chauffeur.

Maigret's bulky form blocked the way. He hesitated.

"I suppose you won't prevent me . . .?"

"Certainly not. You're right. *We*'ll go there right away!"

CHAPTER XII

THE UNFINISHED LETTER

THE car halted at a cross-roads. Open country, no houses in sight. The chauffeur looked round for orders.

Since leaving Ouistreham a great change had come over the mayor. So far he had always kept his nerves under control, retained something of his dignity even in the most trying circumstances. All that was ended. He had lost self-control, given way to something uncommonly like panic. And his appearance, the scars and bruises on his face, emphasized his plight. All the way he had been gazing nervously out of the window.

When the car stopped he shot an enquiring glance at Maigret. But the Inspector indulged in the malicious pleasure of asking:

"Well, what's our next move?"

Not a soul on the road or in the orchards beside it. Obviously Madame Grandmaison had not alighted merely to feast her eyes on the landscape. If, on reaching this point, she had sent her chauffeur home, it was because she had an appointment, or had suddenly caught sight of someone with whom she wished to have a private interview.

The air was laden with the fumes of rain-soaked earth; the leaves were dripping. Cows stared at the car, without ceasing to munch. . . .

The mayor seemed to expect to discover his wife hiding behind a hedge or tree-trunk, for he kept on peering anxiously in all directions.

"See that?" Maigret sounded as if he were helping out a novice.

There was no mistaking the tyre-prints on the Dives road. A car had stopped there, had had some trouble in turning owing to the narrowness of the road, and gone off again.

"A light lorry. Pretty old," Maigret observed, and told the chauffeur to follow up the tracks.

They soon stopped again. Well before Dives the tracks petered out where a stony by-road led off to the right. Monsieur Grandmaison was still on the alert, a glint of anger mingling with the apprehension in his eyes.

"What do you make of it?"

"There's a village over there, five hundred yards down that road."

"In that case we'd better leave the car here."

Weariness gave Maigret an air of almost inhuman apathy. He moved like a sleep-walker, or a machine carried forward by its own momentum. Anyone seeing the two men walking down the road would have imagined that the mayor was in command, Maigret an underling.

They went past a cottage with fowls roaming around it; a woman on the doorstep eyed them wonderingly. Presently they came out at the back of the village church, which was hardly larger than the cottage. On their left was a tobacconist's.

Maigret displayed his empty pouch. "Wait a moment, please."

The shop dealt in groceries and household sundries as well as tobacco. An old man emerged from a room with a vaulted ceiling and called his daughter to serve the customer. Through the half-open door Maigret had a glimpse of a telephone fixed on the wall.

"How long is it since my friend came and used your 'phone?"

The girl answered promptly:

"Oh, quite an hour."

"Ah! Then the lady turned up all right?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, she called in here to ask her way. It's quite easy to find. The last house in the lane on the right."

He went out, composed as ever. Monsieur Grandmaison was waiting in front of the church, casting agitated glances round him. If he goes on behaving like that, Maigret thought, we'll have all the village turning out to watch us!

"It's just struck me," he said in a low tone, "that we may as well divide forces for this job. Will you make searches on the left, where the fields begin? I'll do the same thing on the right."

A gleam of satisfaction, which he vainly tried to hide, showed in the mayor's eyes. Maigret saw what was in his mind. He hoped to be the first to find Madame Grandmaison, and have the opportunity for a private talk with her.

"Right you are!" he replied with feigned indifference.

The village consisted of some twenty houses. At one point they were huddled side by side and there was an apology for a road between them, littered with dung. It was still raining—a fine misty drizzle—and nobody was about. But curtains were drawn stealthily aside. Maigret had glimpses of old women, wizened peasant faces, peeping at the strangers.

On the outskirts, just beside a meadow in which two horses were scampering about, was a small low hut, with a curiously humped roof and two steps leading to the door. Maigret looked back, listened. He heard the mayor's footfalls at the other end of the village. Without knocking, he walked in.

The room was in darkness but for the glow of a wood fire. As he entered there was a rustling in the shadows. He glimpsed a dark form, a blob of white—an old woman's cap.

She shuffled up to him, bent-backed.

"What do you want?" she asked.

The room was stuffy; there was a mingled stench of fowls, boiled cabbage, litter. Chickens were pecking round the logs beside the fire. Maigret's head almost touched the ceiling.

He noticed a door at the far end. He knew he must act quickly. Without a word he went up to the door, threw it open.

Madame Grandmaison was sitting at a table, writing; Martineau beside her.

There was a moment's pause. Madame Grandmaison jumped up from the rush-bottomed chair in which she was sitting. Martineau's first movement was to grab the sheet of paper and crush it in his hand. Instinctively the two drew closer together.

There were only two rooms in the hut. This one was the old woman's bedroom. On the whitewashed walls hung two portraits and some framed colour-prints. A high four-poster bed. The table at which Madame Grandmaison had been writing was a wash-stand; the basin stood on the floor.

Maigret opened the conversation by saying:

"Your husband will be here in a few minutes."

"Your doing, I presume," said the man furiously.

"Hush, Raymond."

So she called him by his Christian name, and that name was not Jean but Raymond. . . . Maigret went to the door, listened, came back to them.

"Will you give me the letter you were writing?"

They gazed at each other. Madame Grandmaison was pale, her features drawn and weary. Last time Maigret saw her she had been engaged in what the social set to which she belonged regarded as a woman's most exalted function—playing the part of hostess.

She had played it expertly, he had noticed; he had been struck by the conventional but charming amiability with which she dispensed cups of tea and smiles, or responded to a compliment.

He had pictured her life, with its daily round of visits, entertaining, supervising the children's education. Two or three months a year at fashionable resorts. A mild desire to fascinate. But less interest in her "appeal" than in the world's esteem.

No doubt something of all that remained in the woman standing before him. But there was something else. Actually she was displaying more self-possession, not to say courage, than the man beside her, who indeed looked like breaking down completely.

"Give him the letter," she said, noticing that he was about to tear it up. There were only two lines of it.

Dear Headmaster,

Would you be so good as to . . .

It was in the characteristic handwriting—tall, with a backward slope—of girls educated in the early nineteen-hundreds in fashionable schools.

"You had two telephone calls this morning, hadn't you? One from your husband. Or, to be accurate, you rang him up to say you were coming to Ouistreham. Then Monsieur Martineau called you, and asked you to come here. He sent a delivery-van to meet you at the turning."

On the table, behind the inkpot, lay something that

Maigret had not noticed at first: a wad of thousand-franc notes.

Martineau followed his gaze. Too late to do anything. A rush of hopelessness came over him. He sank on to the old woman's bed and stared forlornly at the floor.

"Was it you who brought him that money?"

What Maigret had come to regard as the characteristic atmosphere, so to speak, of this case, settled in again. He had been conscious of it in the mayor's study when he had found Louis belabouring the mayor and neither would vouchsafe a word of explanation. Then, again, in the schooner's cabin, where none of the three men would speak. A sort of passive resistance. A conspiracy of silence.

"As your son's at *Stanislas*, I presume this letter is intended for the headmaster of that school. As for the money . . . Why, of course! When the schooner ran aground, Martineau had to swim for it. He must have left his wallet on board. You brought him this money to pay . . ." He broke off, went on in a different tone: "The other men on board, Martineau—did they get ashore safely?"

The man hesitated; then, almost involuntarily, it seemed, gave a slight nod.

"I won't ask you where they're hiding. I know you wouldn't tell me."

"That's so."

"*What*'s so?" The door had just been flung open. The mayor barked out the question. He had changed out of recognition. He was now in a towering rage, his fists clenched, breathing heavily. His eyes roved from his wife's face to Martineau; thence to the bundle of notes on the table. But behind the truculence of his gaze there lurked a secret fear, perhaps a premonition of disaster.

"What's he been saying? What new lie has he invented? And she, why should she—?" His voice broke. He paused for breath. Maigret held himself in readiness to intervene, if necessary. "'That's so,' he said. What did he mean? What's happening? What plot's being hatched here? That money—whose is it?"

The old woman could be heard in the next room shuffling towards the front door, calling her fowls.

"Chick! Chick! Chick!"

A patter of Indian corn on the steps. Indignant cackles from a neighbour's hen as she shooed it away. "'Taint for you, Blackie. Get out of here!"

In the bedroom, silence. A portentous silence, brooding, mournful as the grey rain-blurred sky.

Fear lay behind it. All these people were hag-ridden: Martineau, the woman, the mayor. And each, it seemed, was haunted by a different fear—an unshared secret.

Deliberately Maigret took a solemn tone, like a judge's on the bench.

"My instructions are to discover and to arrest the murderer of Captain Joris, who was wounded by a shot from a revolver, and to whom, shortly after, a fatal dose of strychnine was administered in his house. Has any one of you a statement to make bearing on this crime?"

Till now, no one had noticed that the room was unheated. Suddenly everyone felt cold. Each syllable had rung out, as in a church. And certain words—"strychnine," "a fatal dose"—seemed still vibrating in the air.

Especially the final phrase: "Has any one of you a statement to make?"

Martineau was the first to drop his eyes. Madame Grandmaison gazed first at her husband, then at the Norwegian; her eyes glowed darkly.

But no one spoke. Nor did any of them face up to Maigret's searching gaze.

Two minutes passed. Three minutes. The old woman could be heard putting logs on her fire in the next room.

Again Maigret spoke. His tone was intentionally flat, unemotional.

"In the name of the Law, Jean Martineau, I arrest you."

A scream. Madame Grandmaison made a hasty movement towards Martineau, but, before she reached his side, sank to the floor, fainting.

The mayor deliberately turned his back on her and stared sullenly at the wall.

Martineau heaved a deep sigh, of weariness or resignation. He did not dare to go to the help of the woman lying on the floor.

It was left to Maigret to fetch the water-jug and do what he could for her. He opened the door, called to the old woman:

"Some vinegar, please."

Fumes of vinegar joined the curious medley of smells pervading the hut.

Several minutes passed before Madame Grandmaison came to. After some nervous sobs she relapsed into a state of almost complete prostration.

"Do you feel up to walking?"

She nodded, then rose to her feet. Somehow she managed to drag herself along.

"Follow me," Maigret commanded the two men. "I hope that *this time*, anyhow, I can count on your compliance with my orders."

Her eyes agape, the old woman watched them cross her kitchen. As they went out she called after them:

"You'll be back for lunch, won't you, Monsieur Raymond?"

"Raymond" again, Maigret noted. The man shook his head.

The four of them walked through the village. As they passed the tobacconist's Martineau slowed down, hesitated, and turned to Maigret.

"Excuse me, but I can't be sure of coming here again and I don't want to leave debts behind me. I owe them for a glass of rum, a packet of cigarettes, and a telephone call."

Maigret paid. They walked round the church. The car was waiting at the end of the by-road. The Inspector told the others to get in; pondered a moment before speaking to the chauffeur.

"Ouistreham, please. Stop at the police station first."

Not a word passed during the journey. From the hueless sky the rain poured down, and the wind, which was rising again, tossed the dripping branches of the trees.

At the police station Maigret asked Martineau to alight and gave instructions to the sergeant.

"Keep him in the lock-up. You're responsible for him. . . . Any news?"

"The tug's come. They're waiting for the tide."

The car moved on. As they were passing the harbour Maigret called another halt, and stepped out.

It was noon. The lock-keepers were at their posts; a steamer was due in from Caen. The strip of sand along the foreshore had dwindled and white spray was breaking almost on the dunes.

On the right a crowd had gathered to watch an exciting scene. The Trouville tug was anchored less than five hundred yards from the shore. A small boat was struggling through the waves to the *Saint Michel*, which had almost righted herself with the rising tide.

Maigret noticed that the mayor, too, was watching the

scene from behind the windows of the car. Captain Delcourt came out of the café. Maigret went up to him.

"Will they manage it?"

"They ought to. I've had men on board her for the last two hours, throwing out ballast. The only danger's if the tow-ropes break." He looked up, searching the sky, like a man reading a map, for forecasts of a change in the wind. "Only we've got to get it done before the tide turns."

Catching sight of the mayor and his wife in the car, he greeted them deferentially, but his eyes strayed back to Maigret.

"Any fresh developments?"

"Can't say."

Lucas, however, had news to give. But before doing so he drew his chief aside.

"We've got Louis."

"Really?"

"Yes, and it was his own fault. This morning the Dives police spotted some foot-prints in the fields—the foot-prints of a man who'd walked straight ahead, scrambling over fences. The tracks led to the Orne, to a place where a fisherman keeps his boat pulled up on the bank. Well, the boat was on the other side of the river."

"In other words, they'd crossed it?"

"Yes. They landed on the beach, nearly opposite the *Saint Michel*. Just there, at the edge of the dunes—"

"There's a little ruined chapel."

"Ah, so you know it?"

"The Chapel of Our Lady of the Dunes."

"Exactly. That's where they rounded him up. He was crouching in the chapel, watching the salvage party at work. When I came he was begging the police not to take him away at once. He wanted to stay till the schooner was afloat

again. I agreed to that. He's there now, in handcuffs. He's in terror they'll lose his ship, and he's bawling orders to the tug. Like to go and have a look at him?"

"May do. But not just now."

He remembered that he had the other two, Grandmaison and his wife, waiting in the car.

"Think we'll get to the bottom of it?" As Maigret did not answer, Lucas went on: "Personally, I'm getting to think we never shall. They're lying, every man-jack of 'em. And the ones that don't tell lies won't speak, though I'm certain they're in the know! It really looks as if everyone in Ouistreham has had a hand in Joris's death!"

But the Inspector merely shrugged his shoulders and walked away, grunting:

"See you presently."

Back at the car, he said to the chauffeur, much to the latter's surprise:

"Home, please."

It sounded as if he were referring to his own home, addressing someone in his service.

"Do you mean the house at Caen, sir?"

As a matter of fact he hadn't meant it; but an idea had just occurred to him.

"Yes."

Monsieur Grandmaison scowled. His wife appeared to have lost the power of reacting. She seemed content to let things take their course, to follow the line of least resistance.

Between the city gate and the Rue du Four at least fifty hats were raised as the car passed by. Everyone seemed to know Monsieur Grandmaison's Renault. And the salutations were obsequious. The shipowner might have been a feudal lord visiting his domain.

"Merely a matter of routine," said Maigret in an easy

tone as the car pulled up. "You must excuse me for bringing you here. But, as I think I told you, I intend to have the enquiry finished by this evening."

It was a quiet street, flanked by stately private residences such as are to be found nowadays only in provincial towns. A courtyard preceded the house, which was built in solid, age-grimed stone. On the gateway was a brass plate: *Anglo-Norman Navigation Company.*

In the courtyard a notice-board with an arrow, inscribed: *Office.* Another inscribed: *Counting-house.* A third: *Office Hours, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

The journey from Ouistreham had taken only ten minutes. It was a little after noon. Most of the employees were away at their lunch, but a few were still on duty in the dark majestic-looking offices furnished in mid-nineteenth-century style and sumptuously carpeted.

"I suggest, madame, that you go up to your rooms for the present. Later on, perhaps, I may ask for the favour of a few minutes' talk with you."

The ground floor consisted exclusively of offices. The entrance-hall was spacious, flanked by wrought-iron candelabra. A marble staircase led up to the first floor, which was the Grandmaisons' residence.

The mayor waited sulkily for Maigret to give him instructions what to do. He had turned up his overcoat collar and drawn down his hat to conceal from his staff the condition of his face after the previous night's rough handling.

"Well, what do you want of me?" he asked.

"Nothing very much. Only to authorize me to roam about this place as I think fit—to get the hang of it, so to speak."

"Want me with you?"

"Not in the least."

"In that case, if you've no objection, I'll go upstairs and see how my wife is feeling."

The tone in which he spoke of her now was in marked contrast with his behaviour in the old woman's cottage. Maigret watched him go up the stairs, then went to the far end of the hall and made sure there was only one exit from the building.

He next went out into the street, hunted up a police officer and posted him at the gate.

"Got it? Let everyone leave who wants to, except Monsieur Grandmaison. Do you know him by sight?"

"Course I do. But—but what's he been up to?" A gentleman like him! Why, he's President of the Chamber of Commerce!"

"That's fine!"

A door opened off the hall, on the right: *Office*. After knocking, Maigret opened it and walked in. An odour of cigar-smoke hung in the air, but no one was to be seen.

On the left, another door: *Board Room*. Here, too, reigned an atmosphere of studied dignity. An elaborately decorated ceiling, a deep-pile dark red carpet, lavishly gilt wall-paper. One felt that in such a room no one would dare to raise his voice. One pictured dignified, frock-coated gentlemen, puffing fat cigars, seated round the table in solemn conclave.

A well-established, solid House: the typical provincial concern, handed down from father to son, generation after generation.

"Monsieur Grandmaison? His signature's as good as gold!"

Maigret entered the great man's private office. It had been furnished in the Empire style, doubtless as more be-

coming for a merchant prince. On the wall hung pictures of ships, statistical charts, multicoloured graphs.

As he was pacing up and down the room, his hands thrust in his pockets, a door opened and a startled face peeped in. An old, white-haired man's.

"Please, who . . . ?"

"I'm a police officer," Maigret cut in. Was it fondness for theatrical effects that made him rap out the words so peremptorily ?

The old fellow looked horror-struck, and began to tremble.

"Come, come! There's nothing to be alarmed about. Your employer's asked me to hold an enquiry. You, I presume, are—"

"The Chief Cashier," the old man hastened to explain.

"Ah yes. You're the man who's been in the firm for . . . for . . ."

"Forty-two years. Since Monsieur Charles's time."

"Quite so. And that's your office, through that side-door, isn't it ? Really, from what I hear, it's you who run the business—in a manner of speaking. Isn't that so ?"

Maigret was on velvet. A glimpse of the premises, then of this old employee, had been enough to give him his cue.

"That's only natural, isn't it, sir ? When Monsieur Ernest's away . . ."

"Monsieur Ernest ?"

"Yes. Monsieur Grandmaison, I mean. I've known him since he was a boy, that's why I always call him 'Monsieur Ernest.'"

With seeming casualness Maigret had been moving, as they spoke, towards the old man's office. A humble sanctum, to which, presumably, the public were not admitted. The scantiness of the furniture was made up for by a copious array of files and ledgers.

A packet of sandwiches lay on the cluttered-up table. A small coffee-pot steamed on the stove.

"I see you have your meals here, Monsieur . . . ?"

"Bernardin. But everyone calls me 'Old Bernard.' I live all alone, so there's no point going home to lunch. . . . Of course! It's about the theft we had last week that Monsieur Ernest's called you in. He should have told me. It's all been fixed up. A youngster took two thousand francs from the cash. His uncle's made it good, and the young chap's promised to turn over a new leaf. He's only a boy, sir. He'd got into bad company. . . . You understand, sir, don't you?"

"Quite. We'll go into that later. But don't mind me. Carry on with your lunch, please. . . . It comes to this, then. You were Monsieur Charles's right-hand man before Monsieur Ernest took over."

"I was cashier. There wasn't a Chief Cashier in those days. In fact, the post was created for my benefit," he added proudly.

"Is Monsieur Ernest Monsieur Charles's only son?"

"Yes. There was a daughter who married a business man, but she died in childbirth, so did the child."

"What about Monsieur Raymond?"

The old man looked up quickly.

"Ah! Has Monsieur Ernest told you about him?" he asked in a more guarded tone.

"Was he one of the family?"

"A cousin. A Grandmaison too. Only he was a poor one. His father'd died abroad. . . . It's like that in all families, isn't it, sir?"

"Why, of course!" Maigret repressed a smile.

"Monsieur Ernest's father had more or less adopted him. I mean, he'd given him a post in the firm."

No good beating about the bush. All this had got to be straightened out.

"Just a moment, Monsieur Bernard. Let's get it quite clear. The founder of the Anglo-Norman was Monsieur Charles Grandmaison, I understand. Monsieur Charles Grandmaison had an only son, Monsieur Ernest, who is now running the business. Is that correct?"

"Yes." The old man was beginning to take fright. He couldn't understand why he was being subjected to this cross-examination.

"Right. Monsieur Charles had a brother who died abroad. He, too, left an only son, Monsieur Raymond Grandmaison."

"Yes. But I don't . . ."

"Let me continue, please. . . . Go ahead with your lunch. . . . Monsieur Raymond Grandmaison, who was an orphan and penniless, was 'more or less adopted' by his uncle. What was the post that he was given?"

The old man seemed a little embarrassed.

"Well, he was put into the freight department. As a sort of sub-manager."

"Quite so. Then Monsieur Charles Grandmaison died. Monsieur Ernest took over. Monsieur Raymond kept his job on. That right?"

"Yes."

"One day there was a quarrel. Wait a bit! Was Monsieur Ernest already married when the quarrel took place?"

"I don't know if I should . . ."

"Let me tell you this. If you don't want to get into trouble with the law of the land—and that wouldn't be a nice thing for a man of your age—I advise you to speak out."

"Trouble with the law? I don't follow. Has Monsieur Raymond come back?"

"That's neither here nor there. I asked: Was Monsieur Ernest married then?"

"No. He got married after that."

"Right. Monsieur Ernest was head of the firm; his cousin, Raymond, a sub-manager. What was the trouble about?"

"I don't feel authorized . . ."

"*I* authorize you. Go on."

"It's like that in all families. Monsieur Ernest was like his father, a very steady man. Even at the age when most young fellows kick over the traces he was like that."

"And Monsieur Raymond?"

"Just the opposite."

"Well . . .?"

"I'm the only one here, besides Monsieur Ernest, who knows about it. We found the accounts had been tampered with. Large sums were involved."

"And then?"

"Monsieur Raymond vanished. I mean, instead of prosecuting him, Monsieur Ernest told him to go abroad."

"To Norway?"

"That I can't say. I never heard tell of him again."

"And, soon after, Monsieur Ernest got married?"

"That's right; some months later."

Letter-filing cabinets, painted a dingy green, lined the walls of the gloomy little room. The old employee did not seem to be relishing his meal; he was worried and, above all, furious with himself for so tamely submitting to being "pumped."

"How long ago was that?"

"Let me think. . . . The year when the canal was widened. Just under fifteen years ago."

For some minutes they had been hearing someone moving to and fro in the room above.

"The dining-room?" Maigret asked.

"Yes."

Suddenly there was a rush of hurried footsteps, followed by a dull thud, the sound of a body falling on the floor.

Old Bernard went whiter than the paper that had wrapped his sandwiches.

Chapter XIII

THE HOUSE OPPOSITE

Monsieur Grandmaison was dead. Stretched full-length on the carpet, his head beside a table-leg, his feet against the window-jamb, he looked enormous. He had bled very little. The bullet had passed between two ribs and pierced the heart.

The revolver had slipped from his hand as it relaxed, and lay an inch or so away.

Madame Grandmaison was not weeping. Leaning against the mantelpiece, she was staring down at her husband with a look of profound bewilderment.

"It's all over," Maigret said quietly as he rose to his feet.

A dismal room, austerely furnished. Dark curtains. The cheerless light of a grey day.

"Did he say anything to you?"

She shook her head. Then, with an effort, managed to bring out some words of explanation.

"Ever since we got home he'd been pacing up and down the room. Once or twice he turned to me and I thought he was going to say something. Quite suddenly he fired—I hadn't even noticed he was holding a revolver."

She spoke as women do under the stress of emotion—as though she had difficulty in following the thread of her ideas. But her eyes remained tearless.

Obviously she had never loved Grandmaison; anyhow, never loved him passionately. He was her husband. She

had done her duty by him. And years of life in common had slowly formed a bond of mild affection. No more.

Gazing at her husband's body, she showed none of those signs of desperate grief which, when a loved one dies, cannot be repressed. Wearily, but with steady eyes, she turned to Maigret.

"Was it he?"

"Yes. It was."

Silence. The bleak light from the window fell full on the huge form stretched on the carpet. Watching the woman, the Inspector saw her gaze shift towards the street, settle on something just across it. Her eyes grew dim with a vague regret.

"May I ask you two or three questions before anyone comes?"

She nodded.

"You knew Raymond before you met your husband, didn't you?"

"I lived in the house across the road."

A grey house, rather like her present home. Over the entrance a notary's brass sign.

"I loved Raymond. He was in love with me. His cousin, too, was in love with me—after his manner."

"And the two were very different, weren't they?"

"You have seen something of Ernest lately. Well, he was just the same then. Cold, with nothing young about him. Raymond had a bad reputation. He led a dissipated life, by small-town standards. Because of that, and because he had no money, my father disapproved of my marrying him."

Her voice was low, strangely composed under the tragic circumstances. . . . The summing-up of a frustrated life.

"Were you . . . Raymond's mistress?"

Her eyelashes fluttered. She did not shake her head.

"Then he went away, didn't he?"

"Yes, without letting anyone know. At night. I only heard of it through his cousin. And took with him some of the firm's money."

"Then Ernest married you. Am I right in supposing he's not the father of your son?"

"Yes. Raymond is the father of my boy. When he went away and left me I knew I was going to have a baby. There was nobody I could turn to. Ernest kept asking me to marry him. You understand, don't you? In a small town like this everybody knows everybody, our two houses faced each other, only the street between, and—."

"Did you tell Ernest the truth?"

"Yes. He knew it when he married me. My baby was born in Italy. I stayed there for a year, to prevent gossip. I thought my husband's attitude was something rather fine, romantic."

"And now?"

She turned away; her eyes had just fallen on the dead body.

"Ah," she sighed, "I'm not so sure now. I think he loved me, but in his own way. He'd always wanted me. Well, he got me. Do you see what I mean? It wasn't a generous impulse, as I'd thought. After our marriage he lived exactly as before—for himself only. I was just part of his establishment: a sort of superior housekeeper, the lady of the house. I don't know if he had any news of Raymond after that. I remember one day my son asking who it was when he happened to see Raymond's photo in an old album. My husband merely said, 'Oh, that's a cousin of mine, who's gone to the bad!'"

Maigret was in a brown study. His imagination had been stirred; pictures were forming in his mind of this woman's life. Not of hers alone: of the "inside story" of a firm, a

family. Fifteen years it had lasted. New steamers had been acquired. This room had been the frequent scene of social functions: tea-parties, bridge-parties; christening parties too!

Summer holidays at Ouistreham or a mountain resort. . . .

Madame Grandmaison was exhausted. She sank into a chair; passed a limp hand over her forehead.

"I can't make it out," she murmured weakly. "That captain—he was a complete stranger to me. Do you really think . . .?"

Maigret pricked up his ears, then opened the door. The old cashier was standing outside, too timid to knock. As he gazed at the Inspector a question hovered on his lips.

"Monsieur Grandmaison's dead. Please call the family doctor. Don't let any of the servants or employees know of this, for the present."

He shut the door, all but took his pipe from his pocket, shrugged his shoulders.

He was conscious of an unexpected feeling of respect and understanding for this woman whom, the first time he had seen her, he had dismissed as a mere society butterfly.

"Was it your husband who told you to go to Paris yesterday?"

"Yes. I'd no idea Raymond was in France. My husband asked me to call at my son's school and take him with me for a few days' holiday on the south coast. It struck me as rather queer, but I did as he told me. When I reached the hotel, he rang me up and told me to come back without going to the school."

"Raymond telephoned when you were here this morning, didn't he?"

"Yes. He seemed dreadfully upset. He implored me to bring some money. He said our future—the future of all of us—was at stake."

"Didn't he say anything incriminating your husband?"

"No. And when we were in the cottage he didn't even mention him. He only told me that some sailors, friends of his, had to leave the country and needed money. He said something about a shipwreck."

The doctor, an old family friend, came in. He gazed at the dead body with consternation.

"Monsieur Grandmaison has killed himself." Maigret's tone was heavily official. "It's for you to decide what form of illness led to his sudden death. That's your business. As for the police end—I'll see to it."

He went up to Madame Grandmaison to take leave of her.

"You haven't told me why . . .," she began.

"Raymond will tell you all one day. One last question. On September the sixteenth your son was at Ouistreham with your husband, wasn't he?"

"Yes. He stayed there till the twentieth."

Maigret bowed himself out, tramped heavily down the stairs, trudged through the office, his shoulders sagging, a feeling of oppression on his chest. Once in the street, he breathed more freely. For some minutes he stood bareheaded in the rain, and its contact seemed to brace him up, dispel the morbid atmosphere of the house.

A last look at the windows. Another at those of the house opposite, the scene of Madame Grandmaison's girlhood.

The Inspector sighed. . . .

* * * *

"Come!"

He had opened the door of the cell in which Raymond was confined. Beckoning, he led the way into the street; then started down the road leading to the harbour.

Raymond seemed puzzled, and a shade perturbed, by this abrupt release.

"Still nothing to tell me?" Maigret enquired with seeming gruffness.

"Nothing."

"So you'll take your sentence lying down, eh?"

"I shall tell the judge I'm innocent of murder."

"But you'll not tell him the truth?"

Raymond lowered his eyes. The sea was coming into sight. The tug could be heard whistling as it steamed towards the jetty with the *Saint Michel* in tow.

In a carefully matter-of-fact tone Maigret said:

"Grandmaison's dead."

"What? What's that you said?" Raymond clutched his arm and squeezed it excitedly. "He's . . .?"

"He committed suicide an hour ago, in his house."

"Did he . . . did he say anything?"

"No. He paced up and down his dining-room for a quarter of an hour. Then he shot himself. That's all."

In the distance, beside the lock, a crowd had gathered to watch the salvage operations.

"So now, Raymond Grandmaison, you can tell me the truth. As a matter of fact, I've a pretty shrewd idea of it already. You were trying to get back your son, weren't you?"

No answer.

"You enlisted helpers. One of them was Captain Joris. And, as ill luck would have it . . ."

"Stop! If you only knew!"

"Let's keep clear of the crowd. Come this way."

They took a path leading down to the empty beach, on which great waves were breaking.

"Did you really abscond with some of the firm's money?"

"Ah, so Hélène told you. . . ." There was a vicious edge to his voice. "And of course Ernest gave her his own version of the miserable story. I don't claim to have been a plaster saint—far from it! I was out for a good time. And, for a while, I had a mania for gambling. The usual ups and downs. One day, I don't deny it, I helped myself to some of the firm's money. My cousin found it out.

"I promised to pay it back by instalments. I begged him not to ruin my good name.

"He agreed, but only on one condition; for he was quite prepared to report the matter to the police.

"The condition was that I should go abroad. And never set foot again in France."

A wry smile twisted his lips. He was silent for some moments before continuing.

"Most fellows in my place would have gone South, or East. I had a fancy for the North. I made my home in Norway. No letters came to me from France. The letters I wrote Hélène were unanswered. I learnt only yesterday that she never received them.

"I wrote to my cousin. He, too, never replied. I don't want to make myself out better than I am, and I won't try to play on your feelings by talking about frustrated love and all the rest of it. No, at first I really didn't think much about Hélène. (You can't complain I'm not being frank with you!) I worked, and it was one damned setback after another! It was only at night that I sometimes gave way to a sort of vague regret.

"Yes, I really had rough luck! A business I started went phut. For years it was touch and go—and don't forget I was a stranger in a strange land.

"I'd changed my name. I changed my nationality too; it was easier for me to do business as a Norwegian.

"Now and again I ran across officers serving on French ships; that's how I learnt, one day, I had a son. Only—I couldn't feel quite sure. I worked out the dates. . . . It grew to an obsession. I even wrote to Ernest. Begged him to tell me the truth, to let me return to France, if only for a day or two. He wired: '*Arrest immediate on crossing frontier.*'

"Years passed. I worked like a slave—money-making. A dog's life. And all the time I felt a sort of emptiness. Something had snapped inside me.

"At Tromsö it's pitch-dark for three months in the year. The darkness preys on one's nerves. There were moments when I was half mad with rage.

"I set myself a task: to become as rich as my cousin. It was a sort of dope, I suppose. . . . But I brought it off, thanks to the cod-roe industry. And it was when I'd brought it off that my anger really boiled up.

"I decided to *act* at last. After fifteen years! I returned to France. I hung about this town. One day I saw my son on the beach. And had a glimpse of Hélène.

"I couldn't understand. No, I couldn't understand how I'd lived all those years without my son. . . . Do you see what I mean, I wonder?

"I bought a boat. It had to be done in a clandestine way, as my cousin would have had me arrested without the least compunction. He'd preserved the evidence against me.

"You've seen my men. Good chaps, though their appearance is against them, I'll admit. We fixed it all up.

"That night Ernest Grandmaison had my boy staying with him. No one else was in the house. To make things even surer, I'd roped in Captain Joris. I'd met him in Norway when he was in the merchant service.

"He was an acquaintance of the mayor's. I asked him to

call on the mayor, on some pretext or other, and hold him in conversation while Louis and I kidnapped my son.

"Poor Joris! I little guessed I was leading him to his death. While he was talking to my cousin in the study we got in by the back door. As we were creeping along the passage one of us knocked over a broom.

"Grandmaison heard the noise. He thought he was being burgled and took his revolver from a drawer of his desk. What happened then? I haven't a notion. The passage was in darkness. There was a general mix-up.

"Joris must have followed Grandmaison from the study. A shot was fired.

"As ill luck would have it, it hit Joris in the head.

"I was half crazy. I had only one idea. For Hélène's sake nothing must leak out. There was no question of my going to the police and explaining things.

"Louis and I carried the wounded man to the *Saint Michel*. The first thing was to get in touch with a doctor. We sailed for England, did the crossing in a few hours.

"But then we couldn't land. No passports. Policemen on the quay. I'd studied medicine a bit in my youth. I did what I could for Joris, but it was a doctor's job. We crossed to Holland. There he was operated on. But the hospital refused to keep him unless we notified the authorities.

"The voyage north was a nightmare. Try to imagine what it meant—cooped up on board with Joris at the point of death.

"He needed a good month's rest and proper attention. I thought of taking him to Norway on the *Saint Michel*. But we happened to come across another schooner bound for the Lofoten Islands. I took passages in her for myself and Joris. We were safer at sea than on land.

"He stayed a week at my house. But there, too, people started talking, wondering who my mysterious guest could be.

"So off we went again. To Copenhagen. To Hamburg.

"Joris was recovering. The wound had healed. But he had lost his reason and the power of speech. Put yourself in my place. What was I to do about him? Surely he stood a better chance of getting back to sanity in his home surroundings—that's how I saw it.

"Anyhow, I could make sure of his material welfare. I transferred three hundred thousand francs to his account, using his name.

"The next thing was to get him back to France. It was too risky for me to come with him to Ouistreham. But if I cast him adrift in Paris the police were bound to take charge of him sooner or later. Then he'd be identified and brought back home.

"And that's what happened. But there was one thing I couldn't possibly foresee. That my cousin, fearing that one day Joris might come out with the truth, would so brutally make away with him.

"For it's he who put the strychnine in the tumbler. All he had to do was to slip into the house by the back door on his way to his shooting-pit."

"And you," Maigret remarked slowly, "stuck to your scheme."

"I couldn't bring myself to give it up. I *needed* my son so badly. Only now my cousin was on his guard. The boy had been sent back to school, and I could see no way of getting at him there."

Most of the facts were known to Maigret. But, as he gazed at the scene before his eyes, now so familiar, and all fell into place, he could see more clearly into the bitter conflict that had been going on, unknown to all, between these two determined men. And the conflict had not been only between themselves. It had been with him too.

For, at all costs, the police had to be kept out of it. Neither could tell the truth.

"I came back on the *Saint Michel*."

"I know. And you despatched Louis to the mayor. . . ."

The ghost of a smile hovered on Raymond's lips while the Inspector went on:

"That suited Louis's book—a chance of getting his own back on authority. He could go at it all out; his victim wouldn't dare to breathe a word. A glorious 'rough house'! He bullied Grandmaison into giving him a letter authorizing you to take the boy from the school."

"Yes. I was behind the house, with your man at my heels. Louis put the letter in the place we'd agreed on, and I shook off your sleuth! I scrounged a bicycle. At Caen I bought a car. There was no time to lose. While I went to fetch my son, Louis stayed with the mayor to see he didn't countermand his instructions to the school authorities. A useless precaution, as it turned out; he'd already sent Hélène to take the boy away before I got there.

"Then you had me arrested.

"I knew the game was up! Impossible to carry on while you were moving heaven and earth to get at the truth. My only chance was somehow to make my escape. You were bound to find out everything if we stayed.

"That explains last night's events. Bad luck still dogged us. The schooner ran aground. It was all we could do to swim ashore, and, as the last straw, I found I'd lost my wallet when I landed.

"No money. The police on my tracks. There was nothing for it but to ring up Hélène and ask her for a few thousand francs, enough to see the four of us across the frontier.

"Hélène came at once. But so did you! At every turn

we were up against you. You dogged our steps, but we couldn't tell you the truth; I daren't warn you that you might well bring on another tragedy."

He stopped short. A worried look came into his eyes, and he asked in an uncertain voice:

"I say, *is it true* my cousin's dead?"

It had obviously struck him that Maigret might have laid a trap for him.

"It's true. He killed himself when he realized the truth was coming out. He knew it when I arrested you. He guessed that I'd done this only to give him time to think things over."

They had reached the jetty. The *Saint Michel* was gliding slowly past. An old fisherman lorded it at her helm.

A man rushed up, thrusting the watchers on the quay aside, and took a flying leap on to the schooner's deck.

It was Louis.

He had snapped the links between his handcuffs, given the men in charge of him the slip. Bundling the old fisherman to one side, he grasped the tiller.

"Ease down a bit, for God's sake!" he yelled to the men on board the tug. "You'll tear my bows out!"

"What's happened to the other two?" Maigret asked the man beside him.

"You were within a yard or two of them this morning. They were hiding in old Marie's woodshed!"

Lucas pushed his way through the crowd. He gave a start at seeing Raymond with the Inspector.

"Good news! We've got 'em!"

"Got whom?"

"Lannec and Célestin."

"Where are they?"

"The Dives police have just brought them here."

"Have them released at once. And tell them to come along to the harbour."

They could see, facing them, Joris's cottage. The previous night's storm had stripped the petals of the last roses in the garden. A face at the window: Julie wondering if it could really be her brother she saw at the schooner's helm.

The habitués of the *Sailors' Rest* were standing in a group near Captain Delcourt.

"The trouble I've had," sighed Maigret, "with those fellows and their damned evasive answers!"

Raymond smiled. "They're seamen."

"Exactly! And seamen can't stick a landlubber like myself prying into their affairs." He filled his pipe, ramming the tobacco home with little taps of his forefinger. After he had lit it he sighed again, and his brows wrinkled. "What the devil are we going to tell 'em?"

Ernest Grandmaison was dead. Was one bound to reveal the fact that he was a murderer?

"I suggest . . ." Raymond began.

"I wonder now . . .? We might say that the crime was the work of some foreign sailor with a grudge against the Captain. And that he's gone back to his country. I'll think it over."

The crew of the tug were adjourning to the *Sailors' Rest.* They beckoned to the lock-keepers to join them.

Louis was roaming up and down his ship, running his hands over the woodwork, like the owner of a dog that's been lost and just come home, making sure it isn't injured anywhere.

"Ahoy, you!" Maigret shouted.

Louis gave a start, hesitated. The idea of coming to Maigret—or, rather, leaving his ship again—didn't appeal to him. Then he noticed Raymond, and looked as much surprised as Lucas had been.

"Lawks!"

"When can the *Saint Michel* go to sea again?"

"Right away, if she has to. Not a leak nowhere. Aye, she's a great little ship is the old *Saint Michel*!"

His gaze shifted to Raymond, who said:

"In that case, I'll ask you to have a cruise around, with Lannec and Célestin."

"What? Are they here?"

"They're coming. . . . Whoop it up, or whatever you fellows call it, for a week or two. But nowhere near Ouistreham. Give the people here time to forget about the *Saint Michel*."

"Might take my sister with us, to do the cooking. . . . She's a well-plucked 'un, is Julie."

Still, he wasn't too pleased with himself, because of Maigret. That business of the night before—dare he treat it as a joke?

"Hope you didn't find it too cold, sir, on the wharf?" he grinned.

He was standing near the edge of the quay. With a deft nudge of his elbow Maigret sent him spinning into the water.

"I can make the six o'clock train," the Inspector murmured. But he seemed to be in no hurry to move. He had taken a fancy to the little harbour, and was gazing at it almost sentimentally.

After all, didn't he know every nook and corner of it; hadn't he seen it under many aspects—shivering in the grey dawn, storm-swept, drenched in rain and sea-fog?

He turned to Raymond, who was dogging his steps.

"Going to Caen?"

"Not immediately. It would be unwise, I think. Better leave . . ."

"Leave time to do its work? Yes."

A quarter of an hour later, Lucas came back and asked

where Maigret was. Someone pointed to the *Sailors' Rest*, in which the lamps had just been lit.

Through the misted panes he made out the Inspector's burly form straddling a cane-seated chair. Puffing at his pipe, reaching now and then to the mug of beer beside him, he was listening to the sailors' yarns being swopped around him by men in sea-boots and sou'westers.

Good fellows all! And in the night train back to Paris Maigret heaved a sigh.

"Those three rascals must be feeling nice and cosy now in that cubby-hole of theirs."

"What cubby-hole?"

"The cabin on the *Saint Michel*. Sitting round the swing-lamp, with the big glasses and a bottle of Hollands on that battered old table. And the stove roaring like billy-ho! . . . Give us a light, old chap."

THE MAN FROM EVERYWHERE

Translated from the French:

"Le Relais d'Alsace"

Chapter I

AT THE *RELAIS D'ALSACE*

GRETEL and Lena, the two young waitresses, had almost finished laying the six tables nearest the counter. On the little table-cloths patterned with small red checks they were setting out the long-stemmed coloured glasses used for Alsatian wine. Both had doll-like faces, flaxen ringlets, and it was easy to guess that they were sisters. Gretel, the younger, was sixteen; Lena two years older.

Her elbows resting on the cash-desk, Madame Keller, the proprietress of the *Relais d'Alsace*, was talking in undertones to her husband, who stood beside her, slightly swaying on his crutch. Between themselves they always used Alsatian *patois*.

"Then it's settled?" said Madame Keller, twiddling the pencil which never left her hand. "I'll have a talk with him."

At her back was the kitchen hatch. The cook popped his head through it.

"Some matches, please."

She began fumbling in a drawer full of loose change. Leaning on his crutch, her husband patted his pockets, produced a box.

Unthinkingly, Madame Keller opened it. Above the matches was a lock of brown hair tied with a pink ribbon.

Nick Keller grinned sheepishly. His wife sighed, shrugged her shoulders, tossed the lock of hair into a slop-pail beneath the counter, and handed the matches to the cook.

"All right," she cut in as Nick started to speak. Meaning that, as usual, she'd decide what steps to take without his help; that he needn't trouble to give explanations, and was welcome to amuse himself with all the little girls he could lay hands on.

A sound of footsteps on the stairs.

"Gretel! Lena! Run outside and tidy up the terrace."

The girls made off at once, realizing they were *de trop*. His crutch clacking on the yellow tiles, Nick Keller hobbled away to the far end of the restaurant—it was nearly fifty feet long—sat down beside the gramophone, and began to wind it.

His wife did not need to click her fingers by way of signal. He started a record at the precise moment when a man emerged from the stairway and, yawning, gazed at the sky across the big bow-windows.

"Think we'll have a storm, Madame Keller?" he asked.

His tone was familiar; his manner that of a visitor who feels at home in his hotel. It was four o'clock. He had just risen from an afternoon nap and still looked half asleep.

"Might I have a glass of mirabelle? Hasn't the char-à-banc gone by yet?"

Madame Keller served him with her usual affability; yet there was a perceptible constraint in her gestures. Nick Keller, who was in a belted white coat of the type worn by chefs, stared moodily at the gramophone. Plying his crutch as if it were a walking-stick, he began tracing with it cryptic patterns on the floor.

"Here you are, Monsieur Serge."

A man of about fifty; tall, with thinning grey hair. A suggestion, no more, of flabbiness in his features.

After a sip of his liqueur he took a few steps towards the middle of the room. For a moment he contemplated the stuffed grouse adorning the end wall; then the eagle perched

on an artificial branch over the door; then a photograph of Nick Keller, taken before he went lame, which showed him, gun in hand, bestriding a dead boar.

Impossible to doubt he felt an attachment for all these things; his eyes lingered on them almost sentimentally. Finally he took his stand before a water-colour: vivid blue sea, a rockbound coast upon which rose a pillared temple.

"Do you know, madame, that's a view of the Island of Rhodes?"

"Really?" She didn't raise her eyes from the account-book in which she was making entries.

"Only, in actual fact, the place is far from being the earthly paradise it looks. In that calm, divinely blue sea men fish for sponges. And after four or five years of it every one of them develops spine-disease."

She wasn't listening. She was silently rehearsing the remarks she had to make. There was a vague tension in the air.

On the terrace Gretel and Lena, while pretending to be busy with the tables, were peering through the windows into the restaurant. On the far side of the road could be seen the white frontage of the *Grand Hotel*, its terrace studded with gaudy sunshades, striped mauve and yellow.

There was a faint throbbing in the distance; a car taking the hill on top gear. Monsieur Serge spoke again.

"That must be a good car. They haven't even had to go down into second. . . ." He went to the door, looked out. "Yes, a Packard. Hullo! They're Dutch."

The temptation was too strong; Nick Keller joined him in the doorway. The car was driven by a chauffeur in a white dustcoat with a blue collar. It drew up in front of the *Grand Hotel*.

"How do you know they're Dutch?" Nick asked.

"The number-plate. ND2165. ND stands for Netherlands."

The village of La Schlucht comprises only four buildings, a signpost, and a frontier boundary-mark which before the World War divided France from Germany and nowadays marks the boundary of Alsace.

The signpost announces that the altitude is 1236 metres; that Gérardmer, to the left, is thirteen kilometres distant, and Munster, to the right, twenty-eight.

The first building as you enter the village is a fancy-goods shop, selling picture-postcards and souvenirs. Opposite it stands the *Grand Hotel*, with a petrol-pump and garage, gay sunshades, and a porter sporting a gold-braided cap, known locally as the "runner."

Next to the fancy-shop is a restaurant, above which some bedrooms are available. This, the *Relais d'Alsace*, is owned by the worthy Monsieur and Madame Keller.

A hundred yards farther on is the *Hôtel des Cols*, less palatial than the *Grand*, but more comfortable than the *Relais d'Alsace*.

The Packard had halted in the middle of the road. A handsome car, as sleek and glossy as when it had left the showroom. The chauffeur opened the door.

But his employers did not alight. They were two, a man and a woman, and they were carrying on a heated argument in Dutch.

"They don't seem able to make up their minds," Nick Keller remarked.

"The man wants to go higher, to the Honeck. His wife says they've come quite high enough already, and she's beginning to have trouble with her breathing."

"So you understand Dutch too?"

Monsieur Serge was listening with amusement, studying the faces of the travellers, who went on wrangling, while the

well-schooled chauffeur stood patiently by, holding the door open. Greatly impressed by the magnificence of the car, the porter of the *Grand* was hovering at a deferential distance, cap in hand. In the window of the manager's office on the ground floor a curtain stirred.

"The lady wins!" smiled Monsieur Serge.

Nick Keller shuffled a step forward. The woman had put one foot on the running-board, preparing to alight. A shapely knee, a well-filled silk stocking, had come into view.

She was dark, inclined to plumpness, alluring in a rather obvious way.

Her companion, on the contrary, was a very fair young man. His complexion was as creamy as Gretel's. He had big china-blue eyes, indeterminate features, and was wearing a loosely fitting grey suit that blurred the outlines of his figure to the point of evanescence.

For form's sake he was still protesting. But he knew he was beaten. When the young woman stepped down and cast a pleased, possessive glance around her, he picked up a small attaché-case fitted with a safety-lock and joined her on the road. After giving some orders in Dutch to the chauffeur, he turned towards the hotel.

Nick Keller's eyes were sparkling, as always when a pretty woman was on view. Leaning on his crutch, he lingered in the doorway, watching the woman, who had started down the road to see the view across the valley.

Helped by the hotel porter, the chauffeur unloaded from the back of the car a number of expensive-looking suitcases, stamped with a monogram above which was a coronet.

"Monsieur Serge!"

Madame Keller, who was still at the cash-desk, pencil in hand, had emitted a brisk cough before calling his name.

He went to her at once, all amiability, and drained his glass.

There was a conflict of emotions on the woman's face. Ordinarily she wore a sugary smile, displayed a servile eagerness to please her customers.

Now, however, she had something disagreeable to say. And—she couldn't help it—her features grew hard, so hard that it seemed as if for once she were revealing her true character.

"I'd like a word with you—about your bill."

Monsieur Serge didn't flinch. But, when he looked up, his brows were knitted and his eyes mournful.

"For two months," she went on, "I've not said anything, as you assured me the money was coming; it was an oversight on the part of your bank, and so on."

Her tone was downright rude, though perhaps this was unintentional. She was so unused to speaking severely to a customer that now she overdid it. And the strain had made her face quite pale.

"Last month you told me it was a question of only a day or two. We're not rich people. Times are hard, and we've big bills to meet."

He smiled to himself bitterly. Not rich people, the Kellers, who'd just bought the finest site in La Schlucht and were going to run up another hotel, even larger than the *Grand*!

"You can't deny we've always treated you more as a friend than an ordinary visitor."

Monsieur Serge swallowed hard, stared at the big room which had gradually come to seem to him like home; at the stuffed grouse, the picture of Rhodes, the geraniums deployed, in typical Alsatian style, in a ring round the bow-windows.

"And we've never pestered you with questions, that you know."

The words sounded harmless, but were barbed with malice. Malice aforethought without a doubt. For, when uttering

them, Madame Keller had dropped her eyes, and though her tone was casual, it rang false.

Five months had passed since Monsieur Serge had come to stay at the *Relais d'Alsace*, and during those five months he had done nothing but go for mountain walks, eat, sleep, and read the newspapers. He had made himself at home; so much so that sometimes when the bar ran short of beer he took it on himself to go down to the cellar and fetch a bottle. Once or twice he had even served a customer himself when for some reason none of the staff was at hand.

Gretel and Lena treated him like an elder brother, and shared their childish secrets with him. And if any of the Sunday trippers started being too familiar with the girls, he would intervene, politely but firmly.

"Really now! Can't you see they're hardly more than children?"

He had come to be regarded almost as a member of the household. The engineer employed at the local saw-mill would come to him for advice. The brewer from Munster always shook hands with him. The postman, like everybody else in the village, hailed him as "Monsieur Serge."

"Two thousand seven hundred and eighty francs. That's what you owe us now. . . . It's got to stop!"

Obviously all this had been rehearsed; behind it lay long confabulations with her husband.

"*You* tackle him."

"No, it had better be you. That'll impress him more."

"Suppose he tries to put us off again . . .?"

Monsieur Serge was always very dignified. That was, perhaps, why it was so hard to worry him about money matters. He habitually wore a rather distant look, and had a far more aristocratic bearing than the plutocrat in the Packard who had just entered the *Grand*.

Impressed by his manners, the local busybodies wondered what such a man could be after in a dead-and-alive place like La Schlucht. "It isn't as if he was consumptive and came here for the altitude. He isn't even on a diet. One never sees him doing anything."

Malice prepense behind her rather artificial smile, Madame Keller had been alluding to such gossip when she murmured: "We've never pestered you with questions."

Nick Keller had deemed it better to keep out of range till the "strafe" was over. He could be heard on the terrace, nagging at Lena and Gretel.

"It doesn't seem natural," Madame Keller went on. "Why should your bank take so long sending the money you wrote for?"

Still, Madame Keller didn't seem a bad sort. One's first impression was of a placid, easy-going woman, and one had to know her well to realize that she never spared herself—or others—, ran the hotel single-handed and, what was more, managed to keep Nick, her husband, out of serious mischief—no easy task.

She was still young, and had retained the genteel manners inculcated at the boarding-school where she had been educated.

"And I think it preferable, in your interest as well as ours, not to let the account run on. Please don't take offence. Only—we're not rich people. . . ."

Still harping on her "poverty"! Monsieur Serge rubbed his eyes. Didn't he sometimes help her, on Sundays, to tot up the takings—at this very cash-desk where she now was queening it?

"Listen," he said. "I can't explain why the money hasn't come. But I've a platinum bracelet here which is worth, on the lowest estimate, twenty thousand francs."

He held up his left wrist, a shapely wrist, shadowed by a fine silken growth of down. Round it was a strip of solid metal shaped roughly into a circle. More like an ingot than a bracclet.

But Madame Keller was not in a mood for compromise; her expression made this clear. Her lips had grown still tighter, her cheeks still more pinched.

"We're hotel-keepers, and I'm afraid that sort of transaction . . ."

He smiled, less with his lips than inwardly.

"Even if I made it over to you in settlement of my bill for the last two months and for the coming month? On the understanding, of course, that I could buy it back when my money turns up."

A gleam of cupidity crossed the woman's eyes. But mistrust prevailed.

"You must realize that people like us, who don't know anything about such articles . . . But why not sell it to a jeweller at Colmar or Munster?"

The Packard was being steered into the garage across the road. The shutters of the best rooms on the first floor stood open. One had glimpses of a maid's white cap, and the woman who had just arrived.

A crutch tapped on the tiled floor; Nick Keller hobbled into the restaurant, announcing:

"We'll have a storm to-night."

At the same moment Monsieur Serge was saying:

"All right. I'll take the bus to Munster. You shall be paid tomorrow morning."

Madame Keller was moved to launch a Parthian shot.

"Do you really intend to stay here much longer? I can't think what you see in this place. Such a dull hole! Especially for a man like you, who's knocked about the world."

Another innuendo! One of the many mysterious things about this man was that he seemed to speak nearly all foreign languages. One day some Egyptians had fetched up at the *Grand Hotel*. The porter had come across and mentioned that nobody could understand them. Monsieur Serge had acted as interpreter. He had spent the evening drinking champagne with the Egyptians, whose language he spoke fluently, and for the next ten days was always in their company.

He spoke German too, and English. Even Alsatian *patois* —to the amusement of Lena and Gretel.

When the wireless was turned on in the evening and messages in Morse came through between the items, he decoded them.

"A Dantzig steamship company is telling a steamer in the Pas-de-Calais to unload her cargo at Boulogne instead of Havre."

Madame Keller went on talking.

"And, of course, there isn't a soul here in the autumn. The second season doesn't begin till January, with the winter sports."

Good-humouredly he protested:

"My dear, good Madame Keller—really now . . . ! Well, I'm off to Munster. You shall have your money tomorrow."

He had only just time to run upstairs and fetch his cape and hat. The Munster bus could be heard coming round the bend.

* * * *

A beauty spot. Three hotels along a hundred yards of road. The *Grand Hotel* monopolizing the smart folk and well-to-do. The *Hôtel des Cols* catering for the smaller fry on holiday, and used in winter by ski-ing parties from neighbouring towns.

Unlike these, the *Relais d'Alsace* was patronized neither by foreigners nor holiday-makers. It was primarily a café, where lorry-drivers on the run from Gérardmer to Munster pulled up for a glass of the rough local wine or mild Alsatian beer. Here, too, on Sundays, rucksacked hikers would demand a table and drinks, unpack their food and eat it, singing in chorus.

No electric light, as in the other hotels, or running water. But, by way of compensation, a restaurant as cheerful as it was capacious, red deal tables, light-oak wainscotting, and large bow-windows with an exceptionally fine view.

Six tables always laid—check table-cloths, brightly coloured wine-glasses—ready for prospective diners.

Last, but not least: an innocently charming welcome from Gretel and Lena, the Alsatian sisters, all smiles and dimples, their ringlets flashing as they fluttered to and fro between the tables and the kitchen hatch.

* * * *

Next day at lunch-time Monsieur Serge's table was unoccupied.

"He'll come back by the two o'clock bus," Nick Keller had prognosticated. "Wonder if he'll have had his lunch? Maybe not."

He and his wife were having their meal at the table nearest the counter, for Madame Keller had to keep on getting up, to draw a glass of beer, cut a slice of bread, or set out a plateful of cold sausage and potato salad.

Near the window was Monsieur Hertzfeld, the engineer who had come to La Schlucht to supervise the installation of new plant at the local saw-mill. He had been here for three months and would be staying some time longer. A cheerful little man who took in the Strasburg papers and

engineering periodicals. Now and again, on a Saturday, he would announce that he was expecting a young lady, a cousin of his, for the week-end.

Everybody knew what that meant, and smiled discreetly. For appearance's sake he booked a second bedroom on such occasions. He had once remarked, speaking of Monsieur Serge:

"I shouldn't be surprised if he's a professional engineer, though, as far as I can make out, he never passed through any of the big training-schools. Still, it would take a cleverer man than myself to say what exactly his profession is, or even his nationality."

Two tourists, a man and a woman, were eating at a table without a table-cloth. Which signified that they'd brought their own food, and had merely ordered drinks.

Gretel was in the kitchen. Lena was waiting on a new-comer, a man in his thirties, who had come on a motor-cycle at about eleven and had spent an hour at the *Grand Hotel* before coming across to the *Relais*.

There was something abnormal in the silence of the room. Keller and his wife, like the new-comer sitting by himself, had an expectant air.

Lena was told off sharply several times for trivial misdeeds, such as placing a fork too noisily on a table.

Madame Keller shot frequent glances at the wall-clock, which played a little tune each time it struck the hour.

"Here he is!"

From the direction of Munster came the sound of a char-à-banc changing into bottom speed, and the familiar toot of its horn. They listened to it labouring up the gradient. They counted the bends. "It's passing below the Pierre Fendue now."

The rattle grew more pronounced. With a screech of brakes a big blue car halted in front of the window.

Three passengers for the *Grand*. Some people going on to Gérardmer dropped in at the *Relais* for a glass of beer. A sack of potatoes ordered by Madame Keller was dumped in the yard.

Monsieur Hertzfeld was drumming on the table with his knife-handle. His nerves seemed on edge. There was a shifty look in Nick Keller's eyes. His wife had turned quite pale; her lips were bloodless.

She exchanged a quick glance with the new-comer, meaning, "It's he."

Monsieur Serge alighted from the car. He was wearing a rough mountaineering cape and a green felt hat. As he opened the door he sniffed the air and exclaimed cheerfully:

"Cabbage soup! Of course, it's Thursday. I'd forgotten."

He appeared a little surprised. Lena hadn't come up as usual to take his coat. Madame Keller was looking away, Nick eating noisily, bending over his plate, while the engineer seemed engrossed in a technical review.

Only one person, the unknown man, was gazing at him.

"My lunch, please, Lena. I've had nothing to eat since I got up."

The eagle still clawed its branch above the door, the stuffed grouse was in its usual place. Yet something had changed—was it an atmosphere of veiled hostility he sensed in the room?

There had been a storm in the night and the weather had turned cold. A fire had been lit in the big earthenware stove. Monsieur Serge went up to it. As he was warming his hands his eyes fell on the unknown man. He frowned, his shoulders lifted slightly. Then he smiled to himself, as though an idea had struck him: "They don't believe I've brought the money!"

He went up to Madame Keller and said, raising his voice to show his unconcern:

"I've something for you. This, to begin with."

He fished up from his pocket a gold brooch in the form of an eagle, with a tiny ruby for its eye. It might have cost two hundred francs or so.

The woman looked worried, wouldn't meet his gaze.

"And this too," he went on.

From his wallet he took some thousand-franc notes.

"One, two, three, four, five. I'll pay two months in advance."

The new-comer had stopped eating. His eyes were fixed on Monsieur Serge.

Nick Keller was lacing and unlacing his boot, heaving deep sighs.

The engineer was emitting little nervous grunts.

Without touching the brooch or notes, Madame Keller said:

"I think that gentleman wishes to talk to you."

Lena kept her back to him, pretending to be busy arranging macaroons on a plate.

Monsieur Serge looked at the new-comer.

"Talk to me?" he repeated in a surprised tone.

The other man rose to his feet with an embarrassed air.

"Excuse me. I'd like to put some questions to you. I'm Inspector Mercier of the Strasburg police. . . . But don't let me keep you from your lunch."

There was not the faintest sound in the room. Yet everyone was eating.

"Ah!" remarked Monsieur Serge quite coolly.

He turned to Lena.

"Lay my place at Monsieur Mercier's table, my dear."

On the wall facing him was a splash of limpid colour, the picture of the "earthly paradise" of Rhodes.

Chapter II

THE HOLE IN THE WALL

"WELL, what have you to say, Monsieur Mercier?"

No irony in the tone, no trace of bluff. On the contrary, Monsieur Serge appeared so calm that the Kellers began to feel uncomfortable.

The Inspector replied, his mouth full:

"I only want some information. You spent the night at Munster, didn't you? Usually you stay at the *Lion d'Argent*. . . ."

"And I wasn't there last night. Quite correct."

"Then, what hotel did you stay at?"

"At none. I spent the night walking about."

A sudden tension in the air. Lena, who was waiting on the two men, pulled a long face, looked away.

"To which jeweller did you sell your platinum bracelet?"

Monsieur Serge gazed at Madame Keller, then at his bare wrist, and hesitated for a moment.

"I decline to answer that question."

Inspector Mercier went on eating. He had a good-natured face; frank, forthright eyes. But now and again he shot a furtive glance at the man opposite him. After each glance he seemed to ponder.

"Will you allow me, in my turn, to ask a question? I've put up with yours, you must admit, with a good grace. The least thing you can do is to let me know—what on earth it's all about!"

He had his high-society manner, as the Kellers called it.

Each time he was about to speak he passed his napkin gently over his lips.

"Do you know Monsieur and Madame Van der Laer?" the police officer enquired.

Monsieur Serge began to shake his head; then paused and glanced towards the *Grand Hotel*.

"Excuse me, are they the Dutch couple who came here yesterday in a Packard? I had a glimpse of them as they were getting out of their car."

"Well, last night, or, rather, early this morning, a theft took place in their rooms."

"Ah!" Monsieur Serge gave an understanding nod; then slowly added: "They rang up Strasburg. You came here on a motor-cycle. You made enquiries about potential suspects—that's to say, all the people at La Schlucht just now."

Madame Keller had a sudden desire to see to something in the kitchen; she didn't come back. Her husband went on eating doggedly, his elbows on the table.

"No doubt you followed the method of elimination, starting with the servants. Finally there remained only one person open to suspicion. An eccentric individual who's been staying here some months, doing absolutely nothing; who speaks several languages and as to whose means of subsistence nothing is known. . . . A little more wine? . . . And, as it so happens, yesterday he couldn't pay his hotel bill, and spoke of selling a platinum bracelet."

"Excuse me," said the Inspector in an equally polite tone. "There's more than that. A farm-hand called Renard—you probably know him better than I do, as you've been here so long—says that he saw you this morning at about five, on the road not far from here."

"Have you rung up Munster?"

"Yes. Not only the *Lion d'Argent*, where you didn't sleep

last night, but all the jewellers and second-hand dealers in the town. . . . You see, I'm putting all my cards on the table."

They were speaking in low tones. From where he sat, the engineer could only catch a stray word now and then. When Lena was not handing round a dish she fell to gazing at Monsieur Serge. "So that's what a burglar looks like!" she seemed to be thinking.

The police officer's flow of talk seemed to be drying up. He was frowning heavily, like a man who's making a great effort to remember something.

"Got an alibi?" he asked at last.

"Well, no. But I assume it isn't necessary. Have you inspected the scene of the crime?"

"It was the first thing I did."

Monsieur Serge rolled his napkin, slipped it into a wooden ring, rose to his feet.

"I trust you'll be good enough to let me have a look at the rooms occupied by the—the . . . What was the name?"

"Van der Laers."

"Are they relations of the Managing Director of the East Indies Bank?"

"Karl Van der Laer is his son."

"You don't say so!" He sounded interested, but only mildly. "What's he here for?"

"A rest cure. High mountains don't agree with him. He likes walking, and the Vosges give him just what he wants at a moderate altitude. At four this morning he started out to climb the Honeck, which is six kilometres from here. When he got back at about eight, he found that a small attaché-case with a safety-lock had been rifled."

"Obviously."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing. . . . Or, rather, that the moment couldn't have been better chosen."

The Inspector looked at him with surprise. Nick Keller had finished his meal and was shuffling towards the terrace, trailing his crutch.

"So it comes to this," the Inspector said. "You were out all night, and you've no witness to prove you were at Munster. On the contrary, there's a witness to prove you were seen near here. Yesterday you had no money. Today you have a number of thousand-franc notes. And you can't tell me to whom you sold your bracelet."

"Perfectly correct! Shall we make a move?"

He lit a cigar, after testing its dryness against his ear. As he went out he waved to Hertzfeld, who seemed uncertain whether to return the greeting. Then he patted Lena's cheek. She blushed.

"Where's your sister, Lena?"

She tried to answer, lost her nerve, and all but burst into tears.

The two men were seen to cross the road and enter the *Grand*, in whose glass-roofed restaurant lunch was not yet over.

The manageress, a white-haired lady in a mauve silk dress, with consciously superior manners, came out of her office.

"So you've nabbed him, Inspector?" She disdained to look at Monsieur Serge.

"Too soon to say. Please give me the key."

They went up to the first floor, on which the Van der Laers had a suite of three rooms leading into each other. The room on the left was Madame Van der Laer's bedroom, that on the right her husband's; the middle room, from which the bed had been removed, served as a private sitting-room.

Apprised of the Inspector's arrival, the Dutchman joined

them. He looked bored. His suit was of an even paler grey than on the day before, and he was wearing knickerbockers, which displayed his meagre calves.

The Inspector opened a door. The room was in disorder and reeked of eau-de-Cologne. A luxuriously fitted dressing-case stood open, all its contents embossed with a monogram and coronet.

On the pale green silk pyjamas also, which sprawled across the bed, a coronet had been embroidered.

The Inspector pointed to the dressing-table.

"There's the attaché-case the lock of which was forced."

It was the one which the Dutchman had himself carried from the car to the hotel. The lock had not been so much forced as wrenched off; it looked as if a pair of pincers had been used. There was a rent in the leather below it.

Van der Laer's big, listless eyes lingered on the two men. To break the silence he remarked indifferently:

"It's not so much the money . . ."

"By the way," Monsieur Serge put in, "how much money was there exactly?"

"Sixty thousand francs. I changed my money yesterday, at Paris."

"Where did you put the attaché-case?"

It was Monsieur Serge, imperturbable as ever, who seemed to be conducting the enquiry.

"On that table."

The table stood against the wall, two yards from the door. Some thirty inches above it there was a hole in the wall, through which one could see into the corridor. Monsieur Serge gazed enquiringly at the Inspector, who explained:

"The hotel's comparatively new, and central heating's only just being installed. The masons have got the holes ready for the pipes, but they haven't arrived yet. That's

why the wall is in this condition. Last evening a sheet of thick paper was pasted over the hole. This morning at four it was still intact. At eight, when Monsieur Van der Laer came back, it had a hole in it."

The Dutchman nodded assent. Then turned towards the corridor, where footsteps could be heard approaching. It was his wife. She halted on the threshold, said to him in Dutch:

"Still at it? What a bother it is!"

"It's pretty obvious," Inspector Mercier continued, "how the thief went about it, don't you agree? It was child's-play for him getting inside the hotel; they're a trusting lot here. Then, when Monsieur Van der Laer was away, he'd only to slip his arm through the opening and draw the case towards him. Then he forced it with his pincers and extracted the contents."

Monsieur Serge smiled. He turned to the Dutchman.

"Might I ask you to replace the attaché-case exactly where it was before the theft? Excuse me, but there's something I'd like to ask you. When you left this morning, did you lock the door of this room?"

"Yes."

"Where was Madame Van der Laer?"

"My wife was in bed, asleep."

"And was she still sleeping when you got back?"

"Yes."

The young woman was staring hard at Monsieur Serge.

"May I assume that none of the servants could have got into your suite while you were away?"

The Inspector answered. He was still watching Monsieur Serge with grave attention.

"Certainly. No one entered. The locks have not been tampered with."

Placidly Monsieur Serge took off his coat, and felt the bulge of his arm below the elbow.

Then, "No," he murmured, as if talking to himself. "That wouldn't prove it conclusively. If this lady would kindly . . ."

Van der Laer started to say something. The Inspector asked:

"What do you want her to do?"

"Sorry to trouble Madame Van der Laer. But I wonder if she'd mind going out into the corridor and putting her arm through the hole, to see if she can reach the attaché-case?"

The Dutchman looked daggers at Monsieur Serge. His wife, however, rather peevishly, complied.

"All right. I'll do what he wants."

The hole was about four inches in diameter. But its course was crooked, and the wall thick.

The young woman's hand came through, then the rest of her arm.

"Try to get hold of the attaché-case. More to the left. Still more." He turned to the police officer. "It's a good six inches out of her reach. Of course, the thief may have used a stick or something, to draw it towards him."

He pushed the attaché-case towards her hand. The tips of her fingers brushed the leather.

"Please note," said Monsieur Serge composedly, "that the lady can't see what she's doing, that she can only move her arm horizontally, and that, placed as she is, there's no way of using her hand to any purpose. I defy her to open that case with a pair of pincers or any other sort of tool. . . . Thank you, madame. You must forgive me for having bothered you to help us in this little experiment."

Then he too went out into the corridor. Rolling up his sleeve, he exposed to view a graceful but sinewy arm, and inserted it in the aperture.

His forearm just went through, though not without being grazed by the rough edges of the brickwork. But, once his biceps was wedged in the hole, he was unable to move his arm in any direction.

"I hope, Inspector, you've duly taken note. . . . And you can't have failed to notice that when I came here my skin wasn't grazed in any way. Here's my left arm. Unscratched too. It's a physical impossibility, as I think you'll agree, for the theft to have been committed in the way you suppose—even by a woman or an exceptionally thin man."

Once again Van der Laer seemed on the point of intervening, but thought better of it.

"Your theory about the hole in the wall," Monsieur Serge went on, "is the one that would naturally suggest itself. At first sight it seemed obvious. Only it broke down when put to the test."

The Inspector was looking concerned.

"From which it seems to follow . . ."

"That the theft was committed by somebody *inside* the suite."

"Really, gentlemen!" Van der Laer sounded outraged; his lips were quivering.

His wife said nothing. She was gazing at Monsieur Serge with a peculiar intensity, a sombre glow in her big dark eyes.

The Inspector became flustered.

"Please! There's no need to jump to conclusions. After all, this experiment . . ."

"But there was only my wife in here," the Dutchman broke in. "And I . . . I . . ." He bit his lip, furious with himself for having been the first to point this out. Tactfully Mercier came to his rescue.

"And, as Madame Van der Laer is obviously above suspicion, the investigation will continue. I have every reason

to hope . . .” He broke off. The situation was a delicate one. All eyes were focused on the damaged attaché-case, which still contained some business documents and letters. Rather lamely the Inspector added: “Well, I suppose I'd better be going. Good afternoon.”

He bowed to the young woman, who refrained from shaking hands with him, then to her husband, who remarked stiffly:

“As things stand, I'm more anxious than ever for the thief to be discovered. If necessary, I'll call in a private enquiry agent.”

A faint smile hovered on Monsieur Serge's lips. With a discreet bow, quite at his ease, he withdrew from the room.

“What about going down, Karl?” said Madame Van der Laer.

Without waiting for his reply, she followed the two men along the corridor, then down the stairs. The police officer was in front. Monsieur Serge stood aside to let her pass him. The passage was wide, but she brushed close against him. So close that for a moment her face was only an inch or two from his.

Her eyes were hard; a glint of anger lurked in their depths.

“Neat work!” she breathed.

Monsieur Serge seemed not to have heard. He walked slowly down behind her. When they reached the foot of the stairs her nervousness had visibly increased. After a moment her husband joined her.

As they had already taken their leave, the Inspector and his companion walked straight out on to the road. The porter was lounging against a petrol-pump. A char-à-banc had just disgorged, for a ten minutes' halt, some thirty tourists, who, after buying picture-postcards, were flocking down to the corner of the road to contemplate the famous view.

As they were crossing the road Monsieur Serge enquired:

"Have you anything more to ask me?"

"Yes, two or three points for my report. Have you your identity papers?"

"Certainly. And you'll find them in perfect order."

"Are you French?"

"My name's Serge Morrow. My father was of English origin, my mother Russian. I was born at Paris. French nationality."

The Inspector emitted a sort of grunt.

"Ever lived in Egypt?"

"No."

"Excuse me!" Pretending to brush a speck of dust off Monsieur Serge's collar, the police officer pulled out a couple of grey hairs.

Monsieur Serge swung round on him.

"Making a collection of them, are you?" he enquired with an amiable smile, in which, however, the irony was unmistakable.

"Would you kindly tell me what are your means of subsistence?"

"I've money of my own."

"Where? In what bank, or business?"

But Monsieur Serge merely went on smiling.

They had halted in the middle of the road. Looking towards the windows of the *Relais d'Alsace*, they had glimpses of the Kellers craning their necks, agog with curiosity. Lena, too, who was standing in a corner of the restaurant, duster in hand, was gazing at the road.

The Van der Laers came out of the *Grand*, talking excitedly in Dutch.

"They're having a tiff," said Monsieur Serge, who caught fragments of their talk. "She's furious with him for making

such a fuss over a miserable sixty thousand francs and spoiling their holiday. I think I heard her say, 'You're as mean as your father!'"

The Dutch couple were walking up and down amongst the herd of tourists from the char-à-banc. Their chauffeur was shining up the Packard under the admiring gaze of the white-clad kitchen staff of the *Grand*.

"See you again," the Inspector said. "You'll be staying on here, won't you? I must get back to Strasburg now." He started towards his motor-cycle, turned back. "By the way, I'd better take your identity papers with me."

Monsieur Serge handed them over with a good grace. The Dutchman and his wife parted company near the hotel. The latter went indoors, while her husband started off in the direction of the Black Lake.

She had not been more than five minutes in the hotel before she came out again, obviously in a state of agitation. She walked straight past Monsieur Serge, giving him a long, deliberate stare. It might have been a challenge; but it looked more like an appeal, almost an invitation.

Then she took a path leading to the Honeck. The slowness of her pace and the way she swayed her hips were those of a woman expecting to be followed.

The char-à-banc tooted. The excursionists flocked up, scrambled into their seats. Four or five times a day this happened. A char-à-banc clattered up the empty road, which for the next ten minutes swarmed with a noisy mob of people. Then at a peremptory hoot the road was cleared as if by magic, and residents had the place to themselves once more.

Madame Van der Laer stopped to pick a flower, swung round, gazed meaningly at Monsieur Serge, walked on again.

Almost the tactics of the lowest kind of street-walker.

She, however, was wearing a pale green tailor-made costume hailing from the Rue de la Paix, gossamer silk stockings, and her snake-skin shoes were the creation of an artist in footwear.

Lena came to the door of the *Relais*.

"Will you be dining here, Monsieur Serge?"

Her cheeks were pink. She was afraid of being scolded, and cast timid glances towards her employers, who had remained inside. "Has the Inspector gone?" she asked.

She wanted to say more but was too shy. As a matter of fact, she seemed to have come out mainly to discover what the Dutchwoman was up to.

"You haven't drunk your mirabelle," she added.

Madame Van der Laer was still casting glances over her shoulder. Monsieur Serge patted Lena's cheek; her ringlets were fluttering in the wind.

"I'll drink it presently. My cape, please."

"Are you going away . . .?"

He didn't answer. She went in and fetched Monsieur Serge's big tweed cape, which he slung over his arm. At a turn of the path Madame Van der Laer halted and began plucking leaves from a bush.

Lena watched Monsieur Serge's receding form. As she turned back into the restaurant her cheeks were still flushed. She heard Madame Keller saying:

"He's bound to be vexed with us. Shouldn't be surprised if he moves to the *Hôtel des Cols*. If I'd known the Inspector wasn't going to arrest him . . ."

Nick Keller started the gramophone. Then he set to his lips a flute, which he tried, without success, to play to the accompaniment of the records. Intent on the two young waitresses going about their work, his eyes lit up whenever one of them bent over a table and her blouse sagged at the neck.

Madame Keller was fingering the brooch which Monsieur Serge had given her, unable to make up her mind what to do with it. At last she tried it on in front of a glass; then unhooked it with a sigh.

"Do stop that noise!" she cried peevishly to her husband, who was playing out of tune.

Monsieur Serge had reached the first bend of the path; he was not more than ten yards behind Madame Van der Laer. She had ceased looking round and was walking composedly ahead.

CHAPTER III

ON THE HONECK

THEY could not be seen from the road. The path wound its upward way across the pine-woods and ended at the Honeck, the highest viewpoint in that sector of the Vosges. At the Honeck was a hotel, an observation tower with field-glasses on hire, and an indicator showing the position of the various landmarks within range.

They did not need, however, to cover the three miles between them and the summit.

It began by the young woman dropping her vanity-bag when Monsieur Serge was only a few yards behind. Impossible to say if he noticed her mishap. For he continued on his way with the slow, swinging stride of the practised mountaineer. He passed her just as she was picking up the bag.

This path was familiar ground to Monsieur Serge. With the regularity of a man taking a constitutional he had walked it twice a day during the last few months. He did not need to look at the red arrows on the trees pointing the way, and he skirted the boulders fallen on the path without needing to look down.

Madame Van der Laer could only see his back: the broad but shapely back of a man in his fifties who takes trouble to keep down his fat. And certain small details may have struck her. That, for instance, the great cape over his arm was of an unusual cut, the speciality of an eminent London firm dealing in mountaineering kit. True, it was old and the worse

for wear—but it had kept its "class." Likewise his shoes, made to measure by an expert bootmaker.

Even Monsieur Serge's bearing was distinctive. Not in any way studied. But in his attitude and gestures there was a hint of reticence—of poise and self-control—which is only to be found in people of a certain breeding, of a certain social rank.

The clockwork regularity of his stride had something exasperating about it. Every five paces he gained a yard on the young woman; when he was leading by fifty he disappeared round a bend.

Her impatience got the better of her. She had had enough of this solitary walk through the interminable pine-woods. She quickened her step, muttering some words in a foreign tongue—that was not Dutch.

She was almost running as she came round the corner. The path went straight for a considerable distance; there was nobody in sight.

She stopped short, puzzled and, above all, vexed. Without troubling to control the expression on her face, she started looking round.

Suddenly she blushed. There, barely three yards away, was Monsieur Serge seated on a boulder in a patch of shadow. She spoke too soon, in her eagerness to cover her confusion.

"Excuse me," she said—in Hungarian. "Could you tell me if this path goes to the Honeck?"

He rose politely, threw away his half-smoked cigarette.

"Yes, it leads there," he replied in the same language.

The woman's bosom was heaving. Her breath came quickly. She seemed to take it as a point up to her that he had answered in Hungarian.

"Is it much farther on?"

"About two miles. A pretty stiff climb."

"Are you Hungarian?"
Courteously he replied:
"No, I haven't that honour. . . ."
She tried to think of something to say, so as to prolong the conversation.

"Still, you look awfully like a Hungarian, and you talk the language perfectly."

He acknowledged the compliment with a slight inclination of his head, but made no effort to explain.

"Do you know, three years ago, in Budapest, at the *Continental Hotel*, I met a gentleman who was extraordinarily like you. . . ."

But she drew blank again. Monsieur Serge merely looked a shade surprised; a polite smile flickered on his lips.

"You know Dutch too, don't you?" she said in that language.

"A bit."

She was losing ground. Try as she might, she couldn't hide her discomfiture. . . . She looked away. Then she blurted out with a sort of nervous eagerness:

"I suppose you . . . you don't really *want* to make trouble, do you?"

If he was playing a part, he played it to perfection. From head to foot he presented the picture of a well-bred man completely baffled by a remark addressed to him by a stranger, but doing his best to understand, and to ease the situation.

"Trouble? May I ask what you're referring to, exactly?"

She gave her vanity-bag an angry tug that all but snapped the handle.

"You want a lot, don't you?"

She had switched back into Hungarian, with a few words of German thrown in. He replied in kind.

"Really, you make me quite embarrassed. What *can* you mean?"

She was trembling. Suddenly she looked him full in the face; menace and entreaty mingled in her eyes.

"How much do you want? I'll only ask you to give me three or four days' time."

"I still don't follow. You must have mistaken me for someone else, I imagine. Yes, that must be it. Let me introduce myself. My name's Serge Morrow."

She laughed. There was an overtone of hysteria in her laugh. Then, her lips twisting with rage, she cried impulsively:

"Well, I must congratulate you, Monsieur Serge Morrow—on a very neat piece of work. My husband and the Inspector have fallen for the theory you so cleverly put into their heads—that the theft must have been committed by somebody inside the suite. And, as I was the only person inside the suite . . . I own I'd love to know how on earth you managed it. There was no way of forcing the lock with one's arm jammed in that hole in the wall."

He sighed, gazed vaguely at the pine-trees beside the path.

"I'm more than sorry to hear that I've brought you under suspicion—I assure you I hadn't the least intention of doing so. An absurd charge had been brought against me, and a mere glance at the scene of the crime enabled me to clear myself. I sincerely hope the police won't jump to any hasty conclusion as the result of what I pointed out."

She stamped her foot. Her heel left a deep mark in the soft soil.

"Oh, cut it out! Tell me just what you're after."

"I propose to go to the Honeck, as I do every afternoon. Really, one has only two walks here to choose from."

.

She turned her back on him, started to walk away, swung round again.

"It was easier to come to terms with Mr. Thomas Fleischmann."

"I haven't the pleasure of knowing the gentleman in question."

"What about Budapest? The *Continental*? Room 18, if I remember correctly." Seeing his gesture of incomprehension, she added: "A hundred thousand francs? What? Not enough?"

"I can only repeat, you're making some absurd mistake. I've never tried to extort money from anyone, and I'd never dream of doing so—especially from a woman."

"Really? Still, that doesn't alter the fact that somehow or other you fixed a frame-up, to get me suspected by my husband and the police."

Stung by the insult, he went a shade paler.

"Madame, let me tell you that if a man had made a remark of that sort to me . . ."

"That's a good one!" she laughed. "What about a certain Samuel Natanson who knocked Fleischmann down one evening in the *Continental* lounge?"

"I've never met either of these persons. . . . But I can make allowances for the state of nerves you're in. Naturally enough, considering what happened this morning. . . . I was under suspicion, and all I did was to clear myself; I brought no charges against anybody else. I merely pointed out some facts that the Inspector had overlooked. I'm extremely sorry if, in doing so, I've landed you in trouble, or even merely caused you annoyance."

"Then a hundred thousand's not enough?"

Again he made a gesture of expostulation.

"I'm not in need of money. And if I can do anything to

help you out of a difficult position, you may count on me—and I won't ask anything in return. The enquiry isn't closed, you know."

"So you'd help me to prove it wasn't I who stole the money!" she exclaimed with an angry laugh. "Priceless! If you didn't offer to do it for nothing, I might almost believe you." She shot him a last malignant glance, a declaration of hostilities. "Thanks, but I'm afraid such unpaid services are apt to cost too dear. I prefer open war."

She turned on her heel and started back towards the group of hotels; the path ran downhill so steeply that she leant backwards as she walked.

As he lit a cigarette Monsieur Serge became vaguely aware that there was someone near. His eyes roved the green shadows.

"Eliane!" he exclaimed in amazement, catching sight of a girl standing beside a pine-tree.

His tone was gay, affectionate. He expected her to run towards him. But she gazed at him sullenly, with darkly accusing eyes.

"Have you been here long?"

"Too long!" She gave a slight shiver.

He made the first move. For a moment she seemed about to run away. She was a girl of sixteen, with a slim figure just ripening into womanhood. Thick English stockings, a short plaid skirt. She was hatless, and her hair rippled in the breeze.

"What do you mean, my dear?" he asked uncomfortably.

She gazed at him reproachfully, but did not answer.

"The lady you saw talking to me is a complete stranger," he explained. "I was on my way to see your mother and—"

"Perhaps you'd better not come."

o

A look of sadness, mingled with embarrassment, came into Monsieur Serge's eyes.

"Anyone been to the chalet today?"

"Only the milkman."

"What did he say?"

"You can guess. . . ."

By stooping a little he could see, half hidden by the trees, the chalet, midway between the Schlucht Pass and the Honeck: a fairly large wooden house in the Swiss style. From its windows one had a view right across Alsace to the silver windings of the Rhine and the dark bastion of the Black Forest.

Monsieur Serge started up the path that led to it. His head was bowed. After a moment he looked over his shoulder and called to Eliane:

"Aren't you coming?"

She was leaning against a tree-trunk, sobbing. He was in half a mind to go back to her. Then he clicked his fingers impatiently, and walked on.

A strip of marble fixed to the gate bore the unassuming name: *Chalet des Pins*. A small garden, with gravel paths flanked by clumps of hydrangeas and rose-trees. At the top of the rise the chalet, with a verandah on each side.

The gardener, leaning on his spade, taking a rest, looked away when he saw the visitor opening the gate and sauntering up the path.

In an upper window a curtain stirred. The door opened as Monsieur Serge set foot on the first of the short flight of wooden steps. Madame Meurice's expression, as she greeted him, was almost as aloof as her daughter's had been.

"I didn't expect you today." Her tone had none of its usual warmth.

"I've just met Eliane."

"She's terribly upset. I'd have preferred her not to know, but unfortunately she was there when the milkman told me. . . . I'm afraid she'll have a temperature again tonight."

"Still, she's getting better, isn't she?"

Madame Meurice gave a slight shrug, as though she preferred not to discuss the subject just then. She was a dark-eyed, rather placid-looking woman of about thirty-six, conscious perhaps of her charm but using it with shy discretion. She had the same ivory-white skin as her daughter, the same slender neck and distinctive, slightly prominent under-lip.

"Is it true?" The weariness in her voice told of the long hours she had spent pondering on that question.

"I've just proved conclusively to the police officer that I can't have been the thief. . . . But I don't know what you've heard."

She wavered; certainly she asked for nothing better than to believe him. Unthinkingly she glanced towards the empty chair in which he always sat during his long, almost daily visits to the chalet. But today he avoided it and, without taking off his cape, remained leaning against the mantelpiece.

"Why didn't you let me know you were . . . short of money?"

"Ah, so you've been told?"

"Everything gets known in a little place like this; that's only natural, isn't it?" She seemed to be excusing the local busybodies as well as herself. "Madame Keller had been watching you for some time, I'm told. Telling people that she wondered if you'd ever pay her bill."

Madame Keller, who greeted him with honeyed smiles, fawned on him, scolded the young waitresses if they seemed to be neglecting him. "Hurry up, Lena! What's come over you, Gretel? Don't you see Monsieur Serge is waiting?"

"So," Madame Meurice continued, "you can guess the sort of tittle-tattle that's been going on. . . ."

Only too easily! "What's he up to here?" "Up to no good, that's sure. Just you wait and see!" "Shouldn't wonder if he's a spy!"

She was blushing. Her eyes strayed to the window. Grey sky, a dense mist rolling up the valley like a cloud of smoke.

"I heard, too, that you went to Munster to sell a bracelet, but you didn't sell it. They say you slept out that night and were seen at five in the morning roaming about near here. And that when you came back with the bus your pockets were stuffed with banknotes! I'm only telling you all this because you asked me to. . . . I'd never have thought it would upset my daughter like that. She ran up to her bedroom and locked herself in. Later on she went out without telling me."

Somebody was coming up the steps. Monsieur Serge went to the door and opened it abruptly. Eliane was standing outside, uncertain whether to enter or not. Her eyes were tear-stained.

"Come in, Eliane."

He explained to her mother that she had happened to overhear his conversation with Madame Van der Laer. "I don't know what she made of it," he concluded.

After a moment's silence he spoke again.

"Anyhow, the police inspector has definitely admitted that it wasn't I who stole the money."

But for some reason even this declaration failed to clear the air. Why, if he was innocent of the crime, should there be that look of sadness and suspicion in Madame Meurice's eyes?

"Listen, Serge. . . ."

He gave a slight start. She rarely addressed him by his

Christian name, and never had done so before in her daughter's hearing.

"I can speak in Eliane's presence, as she heard what the milkman said. He came here less than half an hour ago, by the side-path. The Inspector . . ." She paused, glanced uneasily at her daughter, on whose pale cheeks were two small tell-tale patches of red. Then, with a sigh, she continued:

"It may be a trap. He's been going round questioning people. He searched your luggage this morning. And it seems he was particularly keen on learning what languages you spoke, where you got your money from, what letters you received, and so on."

Monsieur Serge said nothing, but he swallowed hard.

"I gather that he specially warned these people not to let you know of his enquiries. Oh, and there's another thing. Madame Keller told the milkman that he noted down the makers' names on your clothes."

"I wonder why?"

"I don't know. . . . No, that's not true. I'd better tell you all. Then you can act as you think best. He spent almost an hour showing round a sort of album he had with him. It contained photos and descriptions of persons wanted by the police. He pointed to a photo and asked everybody in turn: 'Have you ever seen that man?'"

Monsieur Serge struck a match, raised it slowly to his lips. He was intimate enough here to smoke without asking leave. Blowing the match out, he tossed it into the fire.

"The milkman saw the photo. He said it looked like you but he couldn't be sure."

Monsieur Serge smiled. His eyes were fixed on a flower in the carpet which occupied the middle of the floor, surrounded by a wide expanse of pale blue tiles.

"He couldn't read all that was written under the portrait, but he did see what he took for the man's name: 'The Commodore.'"

"Was that all he had to say?"

"No. The Inspector made no secret of his hopes of bringing off a sensational *coup*. He said that the man was wanted in several countries and there were big rewards for information leading to his arrest. With the result that in the three hotels, not to mention the fancy-goods shop, everyone's keeping watch on you."

Monsieur Serge flicked off the ash of his cigarette into the grate, then said in a quiet voice:

"Do you know why Madame Van der Laer buttonholed me on the path just now?"

Eliane gazed at him with rapt attention.

"Well, let me tell you this to start with. If it wasn't I who stole the money, it can only be she. All the circumstances point to her being the thief. She offered me a hundred thousand francs—presumably for me to take the blame and leave the country. And she pretended to think I was a man called Fleischmann whom she'd met at Budapest."

He looked at Eliane, as if inviting her to bear him out.

"She went away in a temper—because I told her I'd never heard of Fleischmann, I hadn't committed the theft, and I wasn't short of money."

"What about the money you brought back from your trip to Munster?" Eliane broke in impulsively.

There was melancholy in his smile, but tenderness as well. Hadn't the eagerness in her voice betrayed an emotion of which she herself was, most likely, unaware? Her mother, too, had noticed it. She gave a slight start, lowered her eyes.

"All money," he said deliberately, "isn't stolen money."

He listened. A car was driving up. A door slammed. Heavy footsteps sounded on the wooden steps.

"That must be the brewer."

Eliane jumped up, ran out of the room and up the stairs.

A ring at the bell. Monsieur Serge didn't move, nor did Madame Meurice. After a few moments the maid opened the door.

The man who entered was taller and bulkier than Monsieur Serge. He had coarse hands, gross lips, and looked as if he habitually over-ate.

Pretending not to see Monsieur Serge, he walked up to his hostess, pressed his fat lips to her hand, and said meaningly :

"I came at once, to make sure you weren't being annoyed about this wretched business."

"Very kind of you."

He still ignored Monsieur Serge's presence. Handing his hat and overcoat to the maid, he took a cigar from his pocket —in which there was always an array of them, their tips protruding—and sat down, puffing and blowing.

A long silence followed : deliberate on the brewer's part —he was hoping to freeze out the 'intruder '—, apprehensive on the woman's. There was no sound but a light patter of footsteps in the next room, where the little maid, busy as an ant, was going about her work.

At last the brewer brought himself to speak.

"It's, dangerous driving after last night's storm. There's three big pine-trees across the road half-way to Munster."

Monsieur Serge walked slowly up to the lady of the house, was about to hold out his hand, but thought better of it and merely bowed, murmuring :

"I must be getting back."

She made as if to rise, but he did not give her time. He was already opening the door.

He did not look back till he had reached the garden gate. Then he saw a curtain hastily drawn to—at Eliane's window.

Dusk had not yet fallen. The dismal light of a wet autumn afternoon lay on the forest. A sudden gust lifted the skirts of Monsieur Serge's cape; he had to wrestle with the wind to bring it back.

When he had left the chalet the light had been failing; in the living-room the shapes of things and people had been growing indistinct. As he gave it a last backward glance he saw the windows suddenly light up, and felt a vague thrill of relief.

Mightn't it be a tactful gesture on the part of Germaine—Madame Meurice? So long as he was there she hadn't noticed how dark the room was getting. Now she was alone with the thick-lipped brewer. He had the field to himself. So she'd rung for the maid and, without rising from her chair, had said:

"Bring the lamps, please, and close the shutters."

One by one the servant drew them to, her white collarette flapping in the wind as she leaned out of each window in turn.

Monsieur Serge waited till the last was closed. Then he walked slowly down the path, his eyes fixed on the pebbles underfoot.

Chapter IV

THE COMMODORE'S NOSE

THE two lamps were far too feeble for the enormous room. Which was why the three tables used at night were always grouped together in the little zone of light beside the counter.

Monsieur and Madame Keller's table, Hertzfeld the engineer's, and that of Monsieur Serge.

Usually the talk was desultory, interrupted by the tinkle of forks and glasses, and the brisk footfalls of the two young waitresses.

Sometimes the girls could be heard whispering in the kitchen. "It's my turn." "Don't be so mean! You had yours at lunch."

For there was always keen competition between Gretel and Lena which should wait on Monsieur Serge. Gretel, a trifle fairer than her sister, had rather babyish features. Lena, whose figure was less developed, looked even younger.

"All right! You can bring him his dessert."

But that night Gretel and Lena had only sad, reproachful looks for their favourite. And the people at the other two tables carefully ignored his presence, though what they said was obviously meant for him, if indirectly.

Madame Keller said to the engineer:

"Really? You've never met our good friend Monsieur Kampf? Of course he usually calls here when you're away at work. He's the biggest brewer in these parts, you know. Made a pot of money, four or five million francs at least. It's his beer you're drinking now."

From the corner of an eye she was watching Monsieur Serge.

"He started as a drayman; then he married his employer's daughter. I've been told she had to marry him—you can guess why. Now he's a widower, but I rather think he'll be marrying again quite soon, and the second Madame Kampf will be the lady at the chalet."

Her expression wasn't exactly spiteful, but it was tenser than the topic called for. One could see she was deliberately getting at Monsieur Serge, perhaps paying off an old score.

"They should suit each other, anyhow," she added. "A widow and a widower."

"She has a daughter, hasn't she?" put in the engineer. "The girl comes to the mill sometimes to watch the saws at work. Quite a pretty young thing. If I were your friend Kampf, I'd rather marry the daughter than the mother."

"Oh, the mother's quite presentable. A bit la-di-da, perhaps. I believe they've come down in the world. When her husband was alive, I'm told, they had a chauffeur, butler, and all the rest of it. The girl didn't go to school; she had an English governess. That's all I have against them, they put on airs. They'd never dream of setting foot inside this place. Still, that doesn't alter the fact that one of these days Madame Meurice will marry a man who used to drive a brewer's dray."

Though his table was only a few feet from the others', Monsieur Serge was as isolated as if he'd been in another room. He ate without a sound, plying knife and fork with a dexterity which always roused Gretel's and Lena's admiration. It was a treat, they said, to watch him. He could negotiate the trickiest chicken-bone with consummate ease, impale each morsel on his fork at exactly the right angle,

making a slight, graceful forward movement of his head as he brought it to his lips,

"I expect they'll keep the chalet when they're married and use it for their holidays. I reckon he'll train his wife to be a bit less stand-offish, and a good thing too! He's a business man first and foremost, and we're good customers. He knows that, and he'll never pass this place without dropping in for a chat. Hullo! There's Fredel."

The porter from the *Grand* had just entered. He often looked in at night for a talk and a glass of beer. A tall, red-haired young man, with a broad Alsatian accent. He spent most of the day hanging round the big notice-board opposite the petrol-pump, on which were set forth the principal walks and beauty-spots. As soon as a char-à-banc drew up, Fredel would saunter towards it, his hands in his pockets, and wait some moments, grinning sheepishly. Then, without looking at the passengers, he would rattle off his piece:

"This, ladies and gentlemen, is the Schlucht Pass, formerly the German frontier. Twelve hundred and thirty metres above sea-level. Lovely views across Alsace. White Lake and Black Lake twelve kilometres away. You see in front of you the stump of the German boundary-pillar which the French broke when they came here. Special reduced terms for a long stay." Then he would back away, his eyes still fixed on the wheels of the car.

"A glass of beer, Lena." He had taken a seat near the Kellers' table. Nick asked in *patois*:

"Any new people at your place?"

"No. The Dutch couple are staying on. And they're a proper nuisance, I can tell you. First they made us have the hole in the wall bricked up. Then they weren't satisfied with the furniture in their suite, and went through all the

other rooms picking out what they wanted. They're always ordering special dishes. And that chauffeur of theirs, he's worse than they are. Why, he refused to eat with us in the kitchen!

"And the trunk-calls they want putting through at all hours! To Brussels, Amsterdam, Paris. They expect the whole staff to dance attendance on them. Ringing their bells from morn till night.

"At dinner they had a fine old rumpus! The woman jumped up in a tearing rage and locked herself in, in her room."

From a corner of his eye Fredel was watching Monsieur Serge, but didn't dare to speak to him. . . . Yet how many drinks they'd had together in this room, he and Monsieur Serge and Nick!

"Is it true the police are coming back?"

"So I hear," replied Madame Keller. "The enquiry's still going on."

Lena, who was handing a cake to Monsieur Serge, hesitated, then picked a piece of white thread off his back. With a childish pout—that thread could only have come from the chalet—she flounced out of the restaurant, saying to her sister in a stage whisper:

"*You* give him his coffee, Gretel!"

In the past a genial atmosphere had prevailed after dinner, everybody joining in the conversation. After Madame Keller had gone to bed, the men stayed on talking, or, at Nick's suggestion, joined in a game of cards. Meanwhile the two girls settled down in a corner to peel potatoes or shell peas for the next day's meals. . . .

Monsieur Serge rose. There was an awkward moment. Madame Keller remained icily aloof, but Nick and Fredel were obviously ashamed of their behaviour.

"Good night, all," he said. "Lena, would you give me my candle, please?"

It was the first time he hadn't had a glass of Alsatian liqueur before going up to bed.

They heard footsteps on the stairs, the sound of a closing door. There was a moment's silence in the restaurant. Then Nick Keller heaved a deep sigh.

"It's just too bad! If only it had been somebody else . . . !"

* * * *

At ten next morning a traveller alighted from the bus that came from Gérardmer. What specially drew attention to him was that he walked straight to the *Relais d'Alsace*, carrying his suitcase, and settled down in a corner without making enquiries about a room.

"Will you be having lunch, sir?" Madame Keller asked.

"Probably. I'm waiting for someone."

"Is he coming by the bus from Munster?"

"No."

That closed the conversation. The man opened his suitcase, took out a folder containing some typewritten sheets which, after ordering sausages and beer in guise of breakfast, he fell to perusing.

A plump, boyish-looking little fellow, with nondescript features which a fluffy yellow moustache made still more indeterminate.

He had not once gazed at the view. Seated at a window, with his elbow brushing the geraniums, he looked up from his reading only to cast now and again a fretful glance at the clock when, at each half-hour, it played its little tinkling tune.

Monsieur Serge had gone out for his usual morning walk. The Van der Laers' car was standing at the entrance of the

Grand. There was no luggage in it, which showed that its owners had in view only a drive to some place in the neighbourhood.

A little later a motor-cycle fussed up the hill and stopped at the *Relais.*

Inspector Mercier got off it, walked up to the new-comer and shook hands with him. There was a shade of deference in his manner.

"Have you been here long, Superintendent? Sorry to be late. Just as I was starting, Berlin rang up. They've given us a reply about . . . Hope you had a pleasant journey."

The rest of the conversation was carried on in undertones. Madame Keller, who, seated at her desk, was pretending to be busy with her accounts, couldn't catch a word. Not till a quarter of an hour later did either of the men address her.

"Is Monsieur Morrow out?"

"He'll be back any moment. It's about the time he always has a short drink before lunch."

The two men started whispering again. There was a rustle of paper, the scratching of a pen.

The plump little man was Superintendent Labbé of the Paris C.I.D.

"I may have made a mistake," Inspector Mercier was saying. "Still, I felt it my duty to inform my Chief, and he got in touch with Paris at once. Is it a fact that you've arrested the Commodore twice?"

"Yes. The first time was ten years ago, the second only four years ago—at Nice."

"And he was acquitted?"

"He wasn't even sent up for trial. At Nice he went under the name of Morton; the whole American colony knew him, and they vouched for him to a man. There was a Mrs. Morton, too, in those days: a great gowk of an

American, dripping with diamonds, who drank champagne by the bucketful."

"Ah," sighed the Inspector a little enviously, "we don't get big cases of that sort at Strasburg. What had the Commodore been up to?"

"Oh, his usual little game—he must have brought it off dozens of times. He settled down at the best hotel with his wife, splashed money about. He ran big banks at the baccara tables in the Casino, and cut a figure in what passes for High Society on the Riviera. He had hosts of friends, of course; amongst them a certain Monsieur Nitti—a 'mystery man' the papers would call him. Well, one evening the Commodore and Nitti were putting down champagne, with an Egyptian who'd come to Nice that morning. Presently up comes a man and hands Nitti an envelope, which Nitti opens in his friends' presence. A wad of thousand-franc notes drops out.

"'Is it your broker sending me this money?' asks Nitti of the Commodore.

"'Sure! It's your share of the profits on our deal in oil.'"

Inspector Mercier was listening, his mouth agape.

"I don't see how . . ." he began.

"Wait. Morton walks off, Nitti and the Egyptian go on talking. Nitti starts in about his old pal Morton, who's a big business man in the States and has all sorts of inside information about stocks and shares. 'Morton,' he says, 'put me on to this deal in oil. I've netted half a million within three days. If he takes a liking to you, he might do the same for you.'

"So now our Egyptian has only one idea in his head—how to get a tip from this financial wizard. Morton lets himself be talked round. But he won't let his friend risk money on anything short of a cert. A week goes by. Then

Nitti comes and tells the Egyptian: 'Our chance has come. A dead snip. Morton's putting up five millions, I'm putting up two. We need ten millions in all. Are you game for the balance?'

"The Egyptian has money in a Marseilles bank. The three men go there in a car. Morton has a wallet with him, in which, he says, are the seven millions. The Egyptian draws the money, and it's put into the wallet with the rest.

"By now it's lunch-time. They have lunch together at *Pascal's*. At two o'clock Morton says to Nitti:

"'Suppose you trot round to my broker's right away and pay the money in. Then we can have our coffee in peace. Mind you tell him it's cover for the deal I talked to him about.'

"So off goes Nitti. They have their coffee. A liqueur or two. Four o'clock comes. Morton's looking worried.

"'If you'll excuse me, I'll ring up my broker to find out what's keeping our friend.'

"He comes back from the call-box white as a sheet. He grits his teeth and says:

"'We've been "had"! That fellow Nitti's a crook, he didn't pay in the money. The broker hasn't set eyes on him.'"

Superintendent Labbé winked; lit a small cigar.

"The good old confidence trick! Nitti, needless to say, has vanished into thin air; ditto the Egyptian's money. Morton lodges a complaint against him. And that's that. . . . I put Morton through it, but there was no shaking his defence. He played the innocent victim. He even offered a bonus of two thousand francs to the police if we caught Nitti. Three weeks later he left Nice, and we lost all trace of him. Obviously he'd joined Nitti in some foreign country and shared the spoils. The alleged Mrs. Morton was a young woman he'd hired to act the part for a few

weeks. He makes a fresh start each time, never uses the same confederates twice. He's played the same trick at Marienbad, Beirut, Calcutta. And he's never given the police a chance of nabbing him—in fact, they've been obliged to apologize to him on several occasions!

"For, while it was impossible to prove he was a crook, it was equally impossible to prove that the Commodore at Nice was the same man who'd been arrested at Vienna eight years before, at London in 1921, and at Amsterdam in '23.

"What's more, the Egyptian himself refused to lodge a complaint against him. He said it was absurd to suspect a perfect gentleman like the Commodore. Can you guess why? Morton put half a million francs at his disposal to help him to tide over his financial difficulties."

The Superintendent ceased speaking, raised his pale blue eyes towards his colleague.

"Supposing it's he!" murmured the Inspector, thrilled by the prospect of arresting a master-criminal.

Someone was coming down the road: Monsieur Serge in his old green cape, swinging his knobbly walking-stick, strolling down from the Honeck. He paused for a moment to admire the Packard, then turned into the *Relais d'Alsace*.

Gretel was dusting the tables, Lena laying the table-cloths for lunch. Nick Keller was in the kitchen, cracking jokes with the cook.

The door opened. Monsieur Serge stamped his feet to shake off the mud. He caught sight of the Inspector, nodded to him and, as he was unfastening his cape, enquired:

"After me again?"

To Gretel he said: "A vermouth, please, my dear."

Mercier did not look towards him, but watched the Superintendent's face, all eagerness to note his first impressions as to the man's identity.

"Introduce me," said Monsieur Labbé.

"As . . . ?" He was doubtful whether he should mention the Superintendent's official position. The latter took matters into his own hands.

"I'm Superintendent Labbé of the C.I.D. Will you do us the favour of sitting at our table?" With his plump little hand he neatly swept back his papers into the folder.

"Have you come all the way from Paris for this case?" Monsieur Serge's voice betrayed no emotion. Then he sank on to a chair, and sighed: "I'm afraid I overdid it. Seven miles on an empty stomach. . . ."

"Oh, come now! You've done more than that in the Carpathians."

The Inspector was patently unequal to the situation. He was young, unskilled to hide his feelings. Just then his eyes said, as clearly as words: "That's got you on the raw! How're you going to answer *that*?"

Quite calmly Monsieur Serge turned and gazed at Superintendent Labbé. His pale, slightly fleshy face was drawn. At that moment he looked quite old. More than old, a sick man. A man who is under treatment, worried about his heart, the workings of his liver, or kidneys.

"The Carpathians?" he repeated in a puzzled tone.

"Well, the Alps, if you prefer. You're a great traveller, I believe."

"Hardly that. I'm just an ordinary sort of fellow with a small income and a taste for change, who's managed to get about the world a bit."

"Under different names—Morton, Fleischmann, Véricourt, amongst others."

"Thank you, Gretel." Monsieur Serge took his glass of vermouth, then turned to the police officer.

"I suppose your remarks are made with some definite

object. But I hope you won't mind my telling you that I simply can't follow them." His tone was mild, courteously apologetic. "I've always had the name of Morrow; it was my father's name and I've never had reason to be ashamed of it, or the least desire to change it. I can only conclude there's been some sort of mistake and . . ."

The Superintendent seemed to have ceased listening. He was leaning across the table and his eyes were only a foot away from Monsieur Serge's face. He was gazing at it like a man proposing to remove a speck of grit from a friend's eye.

Monsieur Serge submitted to the scrutiny good-humouredly, only murmuring:

"Really now! What on earth . . .?"

"Have you never had an accident?"

"No. Why?"

"At Hamburg, let's say."

Monsieur Serge looked frankly bewildered.

"Never had your nose grazed by a revolver bullet?" the Superintendent asked.

Monsieur Serge rose to his feet.

"I'm extremely sorry, gentlemen, but I still fail to understand what you're driving at. First, I was accused of a theft which it was physically impossible for me to have committed. Today you're suggesting that I've travelled in the Carpathians and been shot at in Hamburg. Really! I got my feet wet crossing a stream just now, and I hope you've no objection to my going upstairs to change my shoes."

The Superintendent signified that he had no objection.

No sooner had the door closed than the Inspector asked eagerly:

"Well?"

"Can't say."

"Is it he?"

The Superintendent made a non-committal gesture. Then he said:

"Yes and no. I mean, this man's older-looking, less spry, altogether more bourgeois than the Commodore. The Commodore had *class*, he was a live wire—you couldn't help noticing it. This fellow looks like a 'tired business-man' who's thrown up his job and fusses about his health. Not to mention that he hasn't a scar."

"Has the Commodore a scar?"

"Yes. He had his nose pretty nearly shot off, at Hamburg."

"So your conclusion is . . .?"

"I've come to none, so far. Anyhow, I'll stay on here a day or two. By the way, was it he who suggested that test—with the hole in the wall, I mean?"

"Yes. I'd looked at the hole. But it didn't strike me to try if it was possible to reach the attaché-case by putting one's arm through it."

In his bedroom Monsieur Serge, after changing his shoes, was slowly washing his hands.

"Is it possible to remove all traces of a scar?" the Inspector asked.

"So as to deceive ordinary eyes, yes. But not a surgeon's."

"In that case—"

Superintendent Labbé bridled.

"Ah, but don't forget I've almost a surgeon's eye!"

"Well?"

"There's no scar. All the same . . ."

There was a short silence. Gretel was dusting the next table noiselessly, eavesdropping. The Superintendent completed his phrase.

"All the same, I could swear it's he." He turned to Gretel. "What have you in the way of short drinks?"

"What would you like, sir?"

"Anything. Some port."

"Sorry, sir, we haven't any."

"Vermouth, then."

Monsieur Serge's glass was still on the table. While Gretel went to the counter, Superintendent Labbé said thoughtfully:

"Yes, a sort of cheap edition of the Commodore. Seedy. Hard-up." The association of such epithets with the Commodore made him smile. For the Inspector's enlightenment he added: "The man's reputed to have made over thirty millions by his various swindles."

Footsteps on the stairs. Monsieur Serge's legs came into view.

"You'll be able to go back to Strasburg immediately after lunch," said Labbé to his colleague. "I'll only ask you to step across with me to the *Grand* for a moment, to have another look at the Van der Laers' rooms. What sort of people are they?"

"Oh, quite superior people, very rich. . . ."

Those were the only words that Monsieur Serge caught, for the two police officers were already on their way out.

He was evidently short of shoes, for to replace his wet ones he had put on a pair of pumps.

CHAPTER V

NEXT day being Saturday, the *Relais d'Alsace* started at an early hour preparing for the week-end rush. Nick arrayed himself in a clean coat and trimmed his beard to a point—which gave him a quaintly faun-like air. The telephone was kept busy, Madame Keller hustled the kitchen staff.

"How many chops? Twenty-four? And five pounds of sausage-meat? Right!"

Gretel and Lena were emptying buckets of soap-suds on to the tiled floor of the restaurant and scrubbing it vigorously.

The baker was the first arrival. At nine precisely he dumped a basketful of rolls on one of the tables, and a pile of ring-shaped cakes on another.

"Well, Nick, how's things with you?"

"What's the latest your end?"

"Oh, nothing much. I hear the Railwaymen's Musical Club will be coming here tomorrow in two charas."

Another van drew up outside, the pork-butcher's from Gérardmer. A man wearing striped overalls alighted, stumped in, shook hands with Nick, and slapped the baker on the back.

"Ah, you've got here first, you damned old dough-merchant! . . . Good morning, Monsieur Serge. Not feeling ill, I hope?"

For Monsieur Serge was sitting all by himself in a corner, waiting until the scrubbing operations were over round his

table. He was keeping so quiet one hardly noticed he was there.

"Liver trouble, ain't it?" the pork-butcher went on genially. "I know something A1 for that. I'll send you a bottle."

Usually a Saturday was Monsieur Serge's heyday. He knew all the tradesfolk delivering goods, the char-à-banc drivers and the week-end "regulars." He watched the food piling up on the tables, observed Madame Keller as she sniffed trussed fowls and prodded Alsatian cakes with an expert finger.

Also he usually stood a round or two of drinks.

The latest gossip from Munster, Colmar, Gérardmer was bandied round. Not to mention secrets of the *Grand Hotel.*

"What have they ordered over the way?" Madame Keller never failed to enquire.

"Six calves' brains and a leg of mutton."

"Only six brains for eighteen people! I wonder they've the nerve . . .!"

Glasses were polished crystal-clear, the geraniums watered. At noon Gretel and Lena, wet and grimy, their ringlets sticking to their foreheads, rose to their feet at last, proudly surveyed their handiwork, replaced their clogs by slippers, and hurried off to dress.

That Saturday Monsieur Serge took no part in the life of the household. He was holding a newspaper, but it was impossible to say if he was reading it.

Everybody was eyeing him furtively. Everybody, too, seemed down in the mouth. It was as if they all had been infected by his moodiness.

The truth was, everyone was in the dark. On the previous day the two police officers had had a long interview with the

Van der Laers at the *Grand*. Then Inspector Mercier had rushed off to Munster, where he had a case to investigate.

At sunset Superintendent Labbé had been seen to walk a little way up the road. Fredel had followed him. For quite a while they had stood there talking in the afterglow.

When he came to the *Relais* that evening, Fredel had kept his own counsel. "He asked me some questions," was the most he would divulge.

Monsieur Serge was in the restaurant. Somehow they didn't dare to talk in whispers. Finally, the situation had got so much on Nick's nerves that he had walked up to Monsieur Serge.

"What about a game of backgammon?"

His wife frowned. Her nerves, too, were on edge. The Superintendent showed no sign of coming back. One of the chambermaids from the *Grand* had been seen going up the road to talk to him. Next it was the turn of one of the waitresses to be interviewed.

What made it all so worrying was that nobody knew how things stood, and that Monsieur Serge persisted in sitting on as usual after dinner. Tactless, Madame Keller thought it.

He had had a game of backgammon. The Superintendent had come in about ten, written three long letters, gone out and posted them himself before retiring to his room.

Madame Keller was the next to go upstairs. Nick and his companion had the big room to themselves.

"By the way," said Nick, as he rattled the dice, "don't take too much notice of the way my missus goes on. You know how she is." After a moment's thought he added: "Me, I take folks as I find 'em. I don't care if your name's Morrow, or who you really are. . . . What about another spot of mirabelle?" Then with a leer he added: "What

do you think of that bit of stuff across the way. I bet she leads that Dutchman of hers a rare old dance. . . ."

★ ★ ★ ★

The following day promised to be even gloomier than its predecessor. Towards nine, Van der Laer was seen walking towards the Honeck in full mountaineering kit. Five minutes later, Labbé strolled across to the *Grand* to have another talk with Madame Van der Laer.

Fredel paced up and down the road waiting for the char-à-bancs. Nick, as usual, was having drinks with the delivery men.

"How's your new van doing? . . . Is it true what I heard about old Pierre—that he overloaded his lorry and got stuck half-way up the hill?"

A car lurched to a halt: a shabby touring-car, with a faded hood. Kampf, the brewer, got out, fat calves bulging the leather gaiters, his round paunch well to the fore, his face more flushed than ever. After feeling the radiator, he went into the *Relais*.

"Put a jug of cold water in the radiator, my pet."

He patted Gretel's head, and shook Nick's hand with the patronizing air of a lord of all he surveys.

"How's business?"

"Fairish."

"The dray'll be here presently with the six barrels. . . . Good morning, Madame Keller. Busy with your accounts as usual?"

But it was Monsieur Serge his beady eyes were hunting for. When they lit on him he said nothing, but his face lit up.

"I rather think that one of these days I'll have a great piece of news for you, Madame Keller. Something you never dreamt of. What's the time? Have you put the water in

the radiator? Yes? That's a good girl. Here's something to buy a pretty ribbon with." With a lordly gesture he handed Gretel fifty centimes.

"What's wrong with the little girls today? Has that old scoundrel Nick been working them too hard?" he grinned. "Well, I must be off. Now, Madame Keller, get ready for that big surprise. I'm not giving anything away, but—have a squint inside my car when I'm on the way back."

He gave Nick a dig in the ribs and lumbered out, puffing and blowing, after a final glance at Monsieur Serge.

"He's going to Madame Meurice again," remarked Nick, who was standing in the doorway, leaning on his crutch.

"Why shouldn't he? He's a widower, and she's a widow. A good match."

"Unless it's the daughter he's after!" Nick grinned. "Nice little piece she is! Consumptive, of course. But that old devil's got enough health for two."

The postman came next. The usual glass of Alsatian wine. Monsieur Serge watched him sorting the letters, with an air of expectancy. But there was nothing for him.

The tide of soap-suds was lapping his corner.

"Wouldn't you rather move?" said Lena. "Wait. Wipe your shoes on my duster." She blushed, as now she always did when she had occasion to speak to him.

"There's Kampf coming back," Nick announced. "Why, bless my soul, he has the two ladies with him!"

Monsieur Serge rose. Through the diamond panes he saw Madame Meurice in the seat beside the driver, and had a fleeting glimpse of Eliane in the back of the car. But it was only the brewer who turned to look at the *Relais*—with a large, self-satisfied leer.

"So much for his famous surprise! There'll be wedding-

bells before the month is out." Madame Keller shrugged her shoulders, to indicate her disdain for the brewer's choice.

"She's no chicken, but I will say she's kept her looks. Mighty smart she is today in that white costume and black hat."

"They're as poor as church mice," his wife retorted. "Ask the butcher. Half a pound of meat twice a week, that's all they take. Never an undercut; only scrag-ends and so forth. And they've the maid and gardener to feed as well as themselves. Still, that doesn't prevent her looking right through you when you meet her on the road, and she'd never dream of going out without a hat on. . . . Do you know, they've been getting their milk and butter from the farm for three years now, and they've never once bought a fowl!"

"Oh, Kampf has money enough for two—or three for that matter. Shouldn't wonder if it's the idea of having the brace of 'em—the old 'un and the kid—at the same time, that's taken his fancy." His eyes were sparkling. "Hullo! There's his dray. Open the trap-door, girls."

The barrels of beer were unloaded, rolled to the trap-door, lowered on pulleys into the cellar.

"Is it a fact your boss is going to marry the dame at the chalet?" Nick asked.

"That I don't know. But he's looking mighty pleased with himself this morning, and he told me he was going to do a good stroke of business today. Know where they're off to? I passed them on the way here. To the notary. Kampf's buying the chalet, lock, stock, and barrel, from the lady. Dirt cheap. Sixty thousand francs, so our cashier told me."

"Sixty thousand!" Madame Keller exclaimed. "Why, when the Meurices came here four years ago, it was Kampf himself who sold them the property—for eighty thousand!"

The drayman winked.

"That's the boss all over. No flies on *him* ! "

Nick glanced at Monsieur Serge, who was listening and had turned quite pale.

"A little drink ?" he suggested to the drayman, who spat on the floor before raising the glass to his lips.

"Aye, he's had 'em good and proper ! D'you know, it's he who bought up most of the shares of Meurice & Co., so I've heard. As things stand, the lady must be pretty nearly on the rocks ; if the boss weren't buying the chalet for cash, she'd have been sold up within the month. The usual story. Them that has the money makes more, and them that hasn't . . . By the way, is it a fact you're having an annexe built behind your place ?"

"Next spring, perhaps, we'll start building," said Madame Keller, not without pride.

The drayman eyed respectfully the tables on which beer and Alsatian wine were served on a scale to warrant such expenditure.

"Well, well !" he sighed. "Someone's got to rake it in, I guess. . . ."

When Nick looked again at Monsieur Serge, his head was buried in his hands and he was staring at the floor.

Suddenly he asked :

"How long would it take to get to Munster in the brewer's car ?"

"Under an hour. He drives hell for leather, especially when he has a lady with him to show off to !"

"Would you drive me there ?"

There was a moment of intense embarrassment. Then the drayman muttered apologetically :

"I wouldn't mind doing it in the ordinary way. Only, for one thing, it's Saturday. . . . And didn't the Superintendent tell you you was to stay here ?"

For the first time Monsieur Serge was seen to give way to emotion. He wrung his hands.

"Who is the notary?"

"Maître Aupetit," Nick said. "The one who sold us this hotel."

There was no telephone box at the *Relais*. The telephone was in a passage leading to the lavatory. It had no window, so the door was always left ajar.

"Hullo! Put me on to Maître Aupetit. What? Ten minutes to wait? Can't you possibly manage . . .? No?"

He fell to pacing up and down the room, so lost in thoughts that he didn't notice when he trod on the wet patch where the girls were washing. So agitated did he seem that Gretel was too shy to draw his attention to it.

The telephone bell had not yet rung when Labbé came back from the *Grand*. With a nod to Monsieur Serge he settled down in his corner and, as usual, started writing letters.

Madame Keller asked tentatively:

"Still want to make that call, Monsieur Serge?"

He evidently did, for just then the telephone rang and he went to it at once, not even troubling to close the passage door.

"Yes, I want to speak to Maître Aupetit himself. Please ask him to come to the 'phone. It's very urgent."

Everyone in the restaurant pricked up his ears. Madame Keller scowled furiously at Gretel, who was going on cleaning the floor with great sweeps of her scrubbing-brush.

"Is that Maître Aupetit? Has Madame Meurice come yet? What? Oh, she's just arrived. Nothing signed yet? Good. You can speak freely; I know all about it. No, there's no mystery. My name? Serge Morrow. Yes, Morrow.

"Excuse me, but it's your duty to hear me out. You're selling Madame Meurice's chalet. Yes, I know all about it.

As Madame Meurice is a client of yours, it's your business to sell it at the highest price obtainable. That's so, isn't it? Well, I offer fifty per cent more than your buyer, Monsieur Kampf. Never mind the price. Half as much again.

"What's that? But surely . . . Well, I . . ."

In the restaurant they noticed that his tone was becoming less confident; he sounded almost abject.

"Sorry, I can't furnish a guarantee right away—over the 'phone. All I ask is for you to hold things up for forty-eight hours. What? It can't be done? Well, twenty-four hours then. No, I told you I couldn't give a banker's reference. What? . . . Don't cut me off, mademoiselle! Maître Aupetit, please be good enough to listen to what I have to say. I'm speaking from the *Relais d'Alsace*, and I can't at a moment's notice . . . What's that? Wait! Let's say Monday, first thing in the morning. Yes, in cash.

"Really, Maître Aupetit, do please be reasonable. The most I can give you right away is four or five thousand francs. Wait a bit, though! I've a platinum bracelet, too, that's worth thirty thousand. On Monday, I promise you.

"Don't cut me off! I undertake . . . Wait! Mademoiselle, you've cut us off. What? Oh, it's the notary who hung up?"

A long silence followed. Not a sound could be heard in the restaurant. Then Madame Keller had the presence of mind to signal to Gretel to carry on with her scrubbing.

Monsieur Serge came back at the exact moment when the bristles of the scrubbing-brush began again to rasp across the tiles.

He looked a broken man. His scanty hair was in disorder, as if he had been running his fingers through it the wrong way. He cast a tired, unseeing glance at Labbé, then sank into a chair and stared in front of him with listless eyes.

Through the window he could see a strip of road, the terrace, the scarlet petrol-pump of the *Grand Hotel.*

As the clock chimed half-past eleven a bus-load of excursionists drew up outside. The squeal of brakes was quickly followed by the usual influx.

"Any good draught beer? Real Alsatian beer?"

Hastily wiping their hands on their aprons, Gretel and Lena left their pails and scrubbing-brushes.

"Five beers. One Alsatian wine. One Dubonnet."

The new-comers explored the room, inspected the stuffed birds. Propped on his crutch beside the umbrella-stand, Nick began explaining for the thousandth time:

"It's a bit of the old frontier boundary-post. The stump's over there, in front of the door. Before the war the *Relais d'Alsace* had two ways out—one into France, the other into Germany."

The tourists solemnly inspected the historic stump, wagging their heads. A bespectacled gentleman shouted to his son:

"Don't moon about like that! Come and look at the old Boche boundary-post."

The bus conductor shook hands with Nick.

"There's three more coming up the road. And you'll have another lot this afternoon. An excursion train from Brussels is due in at three."

He surveyed his passengers, made sure that all had had their drinks, then went back to the bus and sounded the horn peremptorily. When his flock was gathered round him he announced:

"We're going up the Honeck now. Fifteen hundred metres above sea-level. Lunch on the terrace with a splendid view across Alsace. Take your seats, please."

As three more bus-loads might be in at any moment,

Madame Keller deigned to help the girls to clear away the empty glasses.

"Tap another cask of beer," said Nick.

Monsieur Serge had not moved. He was still staring straight in front of him.

"Hurry up, Gretel and Lena!" Madame Keller commanded. "Get those buckets out of the way. And tidy yourselves up. You're sights!"

In an elegant white flannel costume Madame Van der Laer came strolling languidly out of the *Grand Hotel*. She looked like someone who has just got out of bed. After darting a glance at the windows of the *Relais* she took a few steps up the road. Then she returned and settled down under a mauve-and-yellow sunshade planted on the terrace.

Fredel hurried forward to light the cigarette she had taken from a jade cigarette-case, becoming extremely flustered when twice in succession the wind blew his match out. In his confusion he dropped the match-box and retreated, flushed and chapfallen.

The woman had chosen a seat exactly in Monsieur Serge's line of sight. He rose, moved to the door and stood there, grasping the handle, his eyes intent on her.

Chapter VI

THE THREE DOORS

FOR a tense moment Madame Van der Laer and Monsieur Serge observed each other. Then he turned the handle, stepped out on to the road, and halted again.

There was no mistaking what she wanted. Her eyes were summoning him to come to her, aggressively—daring him to come!

A sunbeam slipping past the sunshade fell on her shoulder. She didn't move. And it seemed that a dramatic clash was impending between her and the man who now approached, a troubled look on his face.

When he was only a few steps off she indulged in the malicious pleasure of turning away, then looking round and feigning surprise to see him.

"Do you wish to speak to me?" she asked.

It took place in public. Everybody, including the Superintendent, could see Monsieur Serge standing in front of the woman, who was talking to him as she would to a servant.

"As a matter of fact, I thought it was *you* who had something to say to me."

His voice had lost its edge. And he seemed conscious that he was bound to get the worst of it.

"So you've not been arrested yet?"

A painful spectacle. The man daunted, depressed; the woman lolling in her chair, flaunting her beauty, taking a cruel delight in baiting him. As painful as the sight of children

tormenting a chained-up animal; the larger and stronger the animal is, the more humiliated it seems, and the more distressing is the sight.

"Nor have you," was all he found to answer.

"Ah, I see they've not troubled to let you know the latest developments. Sit down. It gets on my nerves seeing you standing there like a dummy." She pointed to a small, uncomfortable iron chair.

He sat down. She gazed at him, revelling in the situation, her eyes half-closed like a contented cat's. She was looking her showy best, and knew it. Exquisitely dressed. Lavishly bejewelled. In the yard her chauffeur was polishing the Packard. The sun was shining, and beside her was a man she hated—at her mercy.

She could taunt him to her heart's content. And she had an audience. From the *Relais d'Alsace* ten people were observing the scene with eager eyes.

She dropped her handkerchief, just for the satisfaction of watching Monsieur Serge pick it up, almost touching her feet with his forehead as he did so.

"The Superintendent will arrest you before the day's out. I'd warned you. The way you bluffed the Inspector with your famous 'demonstration' in my husband's bedroom was a neat piece of work. So neat that for a time it took me off my guard. You were a fool not to press home your advantage while you had the chance. . . . Would you call the waiter?"

To do so he had to rise and go to the restaurant door.

"Waiter, will you bring me one Rose Cocktail. With very little gin, please." Noticing that the man lingered, as if expecting Monsieur Serge to give an order too, she repeated: "*One* cocktail, I said."

"Is that all you have to tell me?" Monsieur Serge realized

that this little by-play had been staged for the purpose of humiliating him.

"Want to go already? I'd have thought you'd like to learn how it is the tables have been turned—that you're suspected now instead of me."

He was looking up the road, as if expecting to see the brewer's car appear at any moment.

"Put the glass there, waiter. Thanks. . . . You remember the arrangement of our suite, don't you? Three rooms opening into each other, each with a door on to the passage. The Inspector ascertained that while my husband was away all three doors were closed. And as no lock had been forced he assumed that no one could have got in." She paused, obviously relishing the situation. "So he jumped to the conclusion that the thief must have put his arm through the hole in the wall. You proved, by a practical demonstration, that it couldn't be done. Which ruled you out—apparently. It looked as if I was the only person who could have stolen the money. That's correct, isn't it? Well, as I said, there's been a new development. We had another 'practical demonstration' an hour or two ago."

Two char-à-bancs drew up, disgorged a noisy crowd of trippers.

"The three doors were fastened right enough. But they were secured in different ways. . . . Good! You're beginning to look interested! . . . The door of my room was locked and the key was on the inside; it was bolted too. My husband's room was locked and he had taken the key away with him. That door couldn't be bolted as well, as he locked it from the outside. So we come to the third door, the door of the sitting-room between our two bedrooms. Do you remember how that door was closed?"

She was gloating. Her eyes were bright with triumph

as they lingered on the motley crowd swarming round the big blue char-à-bancs.

"The bolt had been pushed to. And the door locked as well. But the key had been left *on the outside*. Still, as the Inspector stated in his report, it was impossible to get into the room. My room was locked and bolted. My husband's locked. The middle door bolted. There was only one thing left to try—to see if the key of the middle door fitted the lock of my husband's door.

"Well, it fitted perfectly! So all the theories about the hole in the wall and the theft having been committed by someone inside the suite went by the board. All the thief had to do was walk up the passage, take the middle key, unlock my husband's door, rip the attaché-case open, and sneak out again. Then lock my husband's door and put the key back where he found it."

Monsieur Serge showed no emotion; he gave the impression of a man who ponders over a problem that doesn't concern him personally.

"So you still won't face the facts? Can't you see that everything points to your being the thief? You were out all night. On the evening before you hadn't a sou; the morning after the theft you were in funds. You professed to have gone to Munster, but you were seen near the hotel about the time the theft took place. But that's not all. I took the trouble to look through the Visitors' Book at this hotel and ask the proprietor some questions. Well, when you first came here, five months ago, you stayed at the *Grand* for a week before moving over the way. And the room you had was Number 9, the middle room, whose key fits the door of Number 7 as well."

It annoyed her to see him still so calm.

"Well, what do you say to that?"

"I'm wondering what you're getting at," he said quietly.

"'What I'm getting at?' That's a good one! You rob my husband. You fix things so that I'm accused of the theft. Now I've proved that you were the thief, you have the nerve to ask me what I'm getting at!" She burst out laughing. "Really it's a scream! And I wish you could see your face just now!"

"Still," he remarked thoughtfully, "you know quite well it wasn't I who stole that money."

"So you stick to it?"

"It follows that you've some definite motive for getting me arrested. Do you realize, I wonder, that the consequences of my arrest may be much more serious than you imagine? That it may bring infinite suffering to persons who haven't done you any harm? Do you know that, only this morning, something dreadful's happened?"

"Here?" She pretended to look round for traces of a catastrophe.

"Don't make a joke of it, please. . . . I don't know in whose interests you're acting. . . ."

"'In whose interests?'" she giggled happily. "Really, you're priceless. You take my breath away! It beats the Fleischmann ramp at Budapest! I'd like to know why I should be acting in anyone else's interests when I'm simply clearing myself of a charge that's as beastly as it is absurd. Helping the police to catch the man who robbed my husband."

He looked her straight in the eyes.

"Yet it must have been you who stole that money," he said in a low, pensive tone, as if he were trying to think things out. "Or, if it wasn't you, it's even worse."

A motor hooted. He gave a slight start and looked round quickly. Kampf's car was passing. The brewer was driving

slowly. On his face was a truculent grin; he too was bubbling over with brutal exultation.

Monsieur Serge didn't see Madame Meurice, who was hidden by the brewer's bulky form. But his eyes met Eliane's. She turned away at once. Her face was drawn and very pale.

"I don't follow your last remark."

"No matter."

The car swung round the corner through the woods, going towards the chalet.

"What did you mean by saying 'It's even worse'?"

He hesitated; then, with a rush of uncontrolled emotion, said:

"You don't realize what you're doing. There are things you can't possibly know. . . . Unless it's deliberate cruelty on your part."

Almost she believed him, asked for explanations. Then she thought better of it, laughed again, took a sip of her cocktail.

"What a marvellous actor you are, Monsieur Fleischmann! Really you should try out your talents on the Superintendent —who, I see, is watching us."

"Suppose I asked you . . .?" He paused.

"What?"

He shrugged his shoulders, gazed vaguely at the char-à-bancs, which were beginning to move away.

"Nothing. I've nothing to ask you."

He was regaining his self-command. He straightened his back. His face hardened. As he rose to his feet his eyes settled on the woman's, coolly, searchingly.

"Are you legally married to Van der Laer?"

"If my husband was here, he'd knock you down for that remark. . . . No, perhaps not. I expect he'd do as I do—laugh at you!"

But somehow her laugh rang false. And it was with a secret apprehension that she watched him slowly returning to the *Relais d'Alsace*.

When crossing to the *Grand*, he'd had the look of a whipped dog. He left her with the air of a man who has taken a new lease of strength.

That was apparent when he entered the restaurant, carrying his head high, walked straight to Labbé's table and, without a word of excuse, sat down facing the Superintendent.

"Madame Van der Laer has just told me about that business of the three doors."

"Has she now?" There was a look of mild curiosity in the police officer's childlike eyes.

"Yes. As a theory it's plausible enough. On the face of it, mind you. So I'll ask you to give me till tomorrow . . ."

"To prove it's false?"

"Yes. I hope to do so."

"And at the same time prove you're not the Commodore?"

"That may take a bit longer."

Anyone entering the restaurant would have taken them for two old acquaintances having a friendly chat. Labbé was slipping papers into a brief-case as he talked.

"Would it be indiscreet if I asked you for some information about this Madame Meurice to whom you referred over the 'phone this morning? I gather she lives at a chalet not far from here."

"Yes, the only house between La Schlucht and the Honeck. The Meurices rented it six years ago when their daughter showed signs of being consumptive. Robert Meurice—he was fairly well off at the time—had just launched a concern for the manufacture of cellulose varnish. At the end of the year he bought the chalet outright. His wife and daughter lived there most of the year; he came and stayed

with them whenever he could manage it. He died of pneumonia two years later."

"Did you know them at the time?"

"No. I made Madame Meurice's acquaintance only a few months ago. I'm repeating what she told me. Her husband kept her in the dark about his business. His death landed her in all sorts of difficulties. An employee took over the running of the factory—it's somewhere near Chaumont. The position was complicated by the fact that, shortly before his death, Monsieur Meurice had converted the business into a joint-stock company. Madame Meurice imagined she was well off. She'd never had to bother about money matters. She was induced to sell out her holding at the rock-bottom of a slump, when the shares had dropped to almost nothing. You're better placed than I am to find out the true facts. Personally I've a feeling that that fellow Kampf had a hand in pushing the shares down so as to buy them up on the quiet. Anyhow, he's reputed now to be the real owner of the factory.

"That's about all I can tell you. Madame Meurice never spoke to me about her money troubles, and though it sometimes struck me they were rather short, I never dreamt how bad things were. Not till today. You heard, of course. . . . She had to sell the chalet this morning, and the buyer was —Kampf!"

The Superintendent's eyes were still fixed on the man sitting opposite him.

". . . of whom you're jealous," he added smoothly. "And, if I've got it right, it's less the chalet than the lady that he's after."

Monsieur Serge kept silence.

"Just one more question. Assuming the lawyer accepted your offer, how did you propose to raise the purchase money

within twenty-four hours? The day before yesterday you couldn't produce two thousand francs to settle your hotel bill. This morning you talked airily of tens of thousands."

"Afraid I can't tell you. . . . I might have raised a loan."

"From whom? From the person you met on that mysterious trip to Munster? For you certainly did get money that night. You didn't sell your bracelet. You left the hotel with empty pockets and you came back with several thousand francs. You didn't go to a bank. You didn't sleep at a hotel. You profess to have spent the night walking to Munster and back—something of a feat for a man of your age. And that night a theft took place. You tell me you're not guilty of it, and I'm quite ready to believe you. Still, you must confess . . ."

He paused, then continued in a meditative tone:

"The international police believe the Commodore to have made some thirty millions by his various frauds. Let's say that, with the life he led, he got through half of it. Let's add another five millions given to his various accomplices. There's still ten millions left, that can't have vanished into thin air!"

"And which would have spared the Commodore the necessity of slinking into that Dutchman's room like a hotel rat, to steal a few miserable thousands." There was hardly any irony in Monsieur Serge's voice.

"*You*'ve said it!"

The war of wits was going on so tranquilly that neither Madame Keller nor her husband paid the least attention. Gretel came up and asked:

"Shall I lay your places at the same table?"

Monsieur Serge left it to his companion to reply.

"Why not?" He added in a friendly tone: "I suppose you know who Madame Van der Laer is?"

"I've reasons to think she's a Hungarian."

"She's a dancer. More precisely a night-club artiste who four years ago married Samuel Natanson, a well-to-do American."

His eyes did not shift a hair's-breadth; they were fixed on Monsieur Serge's forehead.

"This man Natanson was fleeced at Budapest by the Commodore, who was then operating under the name of Fleischmann. Natanson divorced his wife a year later, and she became Van der Laer's mistress. After six months, Nouchi—that's her first name—got him to marry her."

"I'm trying to find the connection . . .," murmured Monsieur Serge.

"At Budapest, as I said, Natanson, Nouchi's first husband, was fleeced by the Commodore. Some years later, at La Schlucht, Van der Laer, her second husband, has money stolen from him."

"And you believe the Commodore is at La Schlucht?"

"Or, by a singular coincidence, someone remarkably like him. Shall we go to our table? I think lunch is ready."

"One thing's certain: there's a thief here," Monsieur Serge conceded as he spread his napkin. He did not cut the figure of an accused man. Quite the contrary. The police officer seemed to be treating him as a colleague, asking his opinion.

"Yes, that theory of yours about the way the thief got into Van der Laer's room looks conclusive at first sight. The problem is to spot the flaw in it."

"Do you think you'll do so?" smiled Monsieur Labbé.

"Perhaps I've done so already."

"Really? Would you tell me . . .?"

"No. I'll wait till I'm sure."

The telephone bell purred. Nick answered the call

effusively. When he came back he said to his wife in a loud tone:

"Two cream cakes, half a dozen plum tartlets, and six bottles of vintage Moselle, for the chalet. Gretel can take them on her bike. They're in a hurry."

"Did Madame Meurice give the order?"

He leered to his wife, shot a sly glance at Monsieur Serge.

"What do you think? . . . No, old Kampf it was. Over the 'phone he sounded mighty cock-a-hoop. Shouldn't be surprised if they're celebrating his engagement with a slap-up lunch."

The two men at the table gazed at each other. Then Monsieur Serge lowered his eyes, not to hide the emotions they betrayed, but from a sort of compunction.

"Obviously," Labbé remarked gruffly, "if the lawyer'd fallen in with your proposal, it's you who'd be there now. Queer, isn't it, how things pan out? And tonight you'd have gone to Munster to borrow the money from your friend."

Outside, the vanguard of the week-end hikers could be seen trudging up the slope. Quaint costumes, hobnailed boots, the inevitable rucksacks.

Before entering, they studied the bill of fare posted on the terrace and consulted in undertones. Then they settled round one of the tables without a table-cloth, dumped their rucksacks on the floor, ordered beer, and unpacked their food, talking at the top of their voices in Alsatian *patois*.

Another group took their meal on the hillside facing the inn. The men wore abbreviated shorts, displaying sinewy legs.

With a basket strapped to her handle-bars, Gretel rode off in the direction of the chalet.

"Have some more potato salad," suggested Monsieur Labbé; then went on at once, as if picking up the thread of

his previous remarks: "Just too bad, isn't it? The Commodore in love and obliged to climb down to a rival because he can't get at his millions. Now what, I wonder, could prevent his getting at them? The police? But the police began to take an interest in him only after Van der Laer had his money stolen."

The telephone bell rang again. This time Madame Keller went to answer it, borrowing a pencil from her husband on her way.

"And Madame Van der Laer knew the Commodore at Budapest."

The drift of the Superintendent's ruminations was still obscure, and Monsieur Serge, who was quite unruffled, seemed to be making genuine efforts to discover it.

"There's a telegram for you, Monsieur Labbé. All in numbers. The post-office has 'phoned it through. The postman will bring the written telegram to-morrow."

Madame Keller, who had copied the figures on a leaf torn from a scribbling-tablet, laid it on the table. Labbé wrote in the words under the rows of figures, enabling Monsieur Serge to read it.

Commodore reported at Venice by Italian police stop Have asked for details and will transmit them later.

A group of young men and women seated round a table covered with sausages, cold pies, and scraps of greasy paper launched into an Alsatian folksong. Beaming with delight, Nick went and fetched his flute and began playing an obbligato.

Nouchi had left the terrace of the *Grand Hotel*.

Chapter VII

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

It was a little after three when Van der Laer, followed by his wife, left the restaurant and paused unhappily half-way across the terrace. Trippers, trippers everywhere! True, common hikers fought shy of the splendours of the *Grand Hotel*. But the crowd from the char-à-bancs had no such compunction.

Van der Laer watched the influx with a look of consternation and extreme distress. Just as he was about to sit down, Labbé came up to him.

"Isn't this awful!" the Dutchman groaned.

Hitherto the place had been idyllically calm; now it reminded one of rush-hour on the Paris Boulevards—with a dash of local colour added by the farmers' vans converted for the nonce into char-à-bancs and packed with motley hordes of countryfolk; leather-helmeted motor-cyclists accompanied by girls dressed like boy-scouts; would-be nudists in scanty bathing-kit, their proper garments slung from alpenstocks resting on their shoulders.

All were talking Alsatian *patois*. They gaped. They gorged. They played on loud, outlandish instruments. Two char-à-bancs followed in quick succession and disgorged two village bands in uniform, which promptly started playing in the middle of the road.

"Tomorrow night," Labbé reassured him, "it'll be quite calm again. It's like this every week-end."

"Jeff!" Van der Laer shouted. "Bring the car out.

Anything to get away from this! We'll come back to-morrow evening. . . . That all right, Nouchi?"

"You do what you like. I'm staying."

The contrast was amusing between the pink-and-white freshness of the young man's face and the impression of unutterable boredom conveyed by his demeanour. He was conscious of being grotesquely out of place, with his beautifully cut pale-grey lounge suit, the latest thing in silk skirts, and buckskin shoes. Even the customers of the *Grand*—worthy tradesfolk from Nancy, Belfort, and Strasburg—were eyeing him as if he were a freak of nature.

"Sorry to bother you," said the Superintendent, "but I'd like to ask you some more questions."

"Waiter, bring me a whisky!" He turned to Labbé. "You'll have one too, won't you? But, for God's sake, no more questions. I'm sick and tired of all the fuss that's being made about a miserable sixty thousand francs. Look here! I withdraw my complaint—and that's an end of it."

"Sixty thousand-franc notes?"

"Yes. When the bank changed my florins they gave me only thousands, and I remember that the notes looked practically new. . . . I'd have you know, Superintendent, that I'm here for a rest-cure. Doctor's orders."

His wife had found an empty chair. She had crossed her legs and was swinging her left leg petulantly.

"All right. I won't worry you with questions. I'll only ask you to let me have one last look at your bedroom."

"How much water? Say when."

He drank his glass off in one exasperated gulp.

"Very well. Come along."

Nouchi preferred to stay on the terrace; she had a German novel in her hand. Actually she was more interested in a

young Englishman who throughout lunch had blushed each time she looked in his direction.

"Well, here we are. What more do you want to see?" sighed the Dutchman. "There's that damned attaché-case, and there's the hole in the wall. I hear now that there's some talk about the door-keys. I'm fed up with this hotel. Unfortunately my wife insists on staying. Everybody stares at me as if I was some sort of strange animal, because I've had my money stolen."

A sickly smell of face-cream and eau-de-Cologne filled the air; the bed had not yet been made.

"When you started out at four the attaché-case was intact. When you returned at eight it had been broken open. . . ."

"Look here! Didn't I tell you I wasn't lodging a complaint?"

Three times, with puckered brows, the police officer walked round the room. Valuables lay scattered about everywhere, including the contents of the luxurious dressing-case with the armorial bearings, which in themselves were worth a small fortune. At the end of each circuit he paused at the table on which the attaché-case was lying.

A plain deal table spread with a blue table-cloth.

Idly the Superintendent lifted the cloth. His eye lit on a handle, which he pulled towards him. Then he turned to the Dutchman.

"Did you know this table had a drawer?"

"No. When I'm at a hotel I always keep my things in my trunks. I don't like drawers that heaven knows who has used before me."

"Look!"

The drawer was full of crumpled thousand-franc notes. Labbé counted them. There were fifty-nine, not sixty.

"Well, I'm damned!" exclaimed the Dutchman. "So the money never left this room.

"Steady on! You told me the notes were new. Look at these. All stained with grease or oil. And they wouldn't be in that crumpled state if they'd never left this room. No, they were put there after the theft, yesterday or this morning."

Van der Laer counted the notes again. Then, taking out twenty, he said rather awkwardly:

"I hope you'll allow me to present this small sum to the police. Dispose of it as you think fit. Now that it's all over . . ."

"Afraid I can't take the money. But I'll mention your offer to the head of my department, if you like."

"By the way, it *is* all over, isn't it?"

Labbé gave a non-committal answer. "Anyhow, I don't suppose I'll have to trouble you again."

★ ★ ★ ★

Every hundred yards along the path Monsieur Serge came on groups of campers pitching their tents, kindling fires, unpacking hampers of food. When he arrived in sight of the chalet, the brewer's car was still standing in the drive. Going back a little way into the woods, he sat down. For an hour and a half he waited, without betraying the least impatience.

At five o'clock Kampf stepped forth, almost purple in the face but beaming with satisfaction. He didn't get away at once, however. His starter was out of order and the gardener had to be fetched to crank the car.

The pale blue sky was cloudless; the garden a blaze of flowers. From the woods came sounds of merry voices, young folk calling to each other; sometimes a snatch of a song.

The car rumbled through the gateway. As the gardener was closing it Monsieur Serge approached and greeted him with a friendly wave of his hand.

"Madame Meurice is at home, isn't she?"

In the past the gardener had always welcomed him with eager volubility; now he seemed tongue-tied.

The front door of the chalet was ajar. Monsieur Serge knocked. A voice, Madame Meurice's, said: "Come in."

Both were in the room when he entered. Madame Meurice was sitting in her favourite chair, a handkerchief rolled into a ball in her right hand, her eyes fixed on a dark corner. Eliane was standing, holding herself very straight; she seemed on the defensive. There was challenge in her eyes as she turned towards Monsieur Serge.

The large living-room occupied almost the whole of the ground floor, and the two women had their meals in it. The table hadn't been cleared. On it still stood the tall slim bottles of Alsatian wine sent from the *Relais*, the remains of the tartlets, some fruit—and three black cigar-stumps on a saucer.

They were enough to show where Kampf had sat, bubbling over with vulgar joviality, fat and flabby, his cheeks flushed with wine and jubilation.

"Sure I'm not intruding?" Monsieur Serge lingered near the door, uncertain of his ground.

Madame Meurice persisted in looking away. Her bosom was heaving; he could see she had been weeping when he entered.

It was Eliane who spoke, and, like all who lack experience of saying disagreeable things, she overdid the harshness of her tone.

"Have you something to say to us?"

A little girl, not sixteen yet! And for months he'd been her trusted friend, her confidant. It was he who'd brought the music lying on the piano. The gramophone records, the novels on her bookshelf were gifts from him.

When she caught sight of him coming to the chalet, she'd

run to meet him. Scold him if he let a day go by without a visit. "Mamma was *most* disappointed. . . ."

All he now said to her was:

"Would you mind, Eliane, if I ask you to leave us—your mother and myself—for a few minutes?"

She hesitated, and glanced towards her mother, who without looking round said quietly:

"There's no reason why Eliane shouldn't stay." Her voice sounded tired, a little hoarse; the voice of someone who has been sobbing.

No more, perhaps, than half a minute passed, but so poignant was the silence, broken only by the sound of breathing, that it seemed much longer. At last Monsieur Serge put his question—brutally direct, but he saw no help for it.

"Has the deed of sale been signed?"

No reply was needed. On the table, amongst the remains of lunch, lay a worn leather portfolio which obviously contained family papers, legal documents, and the like.

"I did what I believed to be my duty." She looked towards him, no longer trying to conceal her reddened eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

At last his self-control gave way. He made no gestures, didn't raise his voice. But the words came in a rush.

"So you've sold it to that man! So, all these weeks, you hadn't enough trust in me to tell me frankly how things stood with you. You preferred to go to Kampf, a coarse-minded upstart, whose one idea was to exploit the situation . . ."

"Stop, please!"

"I've come too late. This morning when I rang up the lawyer—"

"You had no business to do so! Don't you realize how compromising it was—for me? What ever must they have thought?"

She was trembling, her fingers plucking nervously at the handkerchief.

"And you shouldn't have come to see us today," she added.

Monsieur Serge was staring at the armchair in which Kampf had sat. And the sight of it seemed to intensify his anger and despair.

"Yes," she went on, "I've sold the house. I'm free to act as I like, am I not? And it's quite likely very soon I . . . I'll . . ."

Her voice broke. Sobbing, she rose, ran to a door and closed it behind her. Evidently she stayed there, leaning against the door, waiting for her tears to cease, for there was no sound of retreating footsteps.

The girl's big eyes were bitterly reproachful as she gazed at Monsieur Serge.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied with what you've done." She held herself stiffly erect, steeling herself to wound him with every word.

"He wants to marry her, doesn't he?" he asked almost in a whisper.

"Why not? What's it got to do with you?" She paused. Even in her anger she dimly realized she was going too far. Nevertheless she said it. "Monsieur Kampf, anyhow, is an honest man."

She felt herself trembling from head to foot, seized by panic. How could she have said a thing like that? She watched him slowly raising his eyes towards her. And saw quite clearly that he was on the point of striking her—or, perhaps, only giving her a good shaking.

His breath was laboured. Drops of sweat stood out on his forehead.

Then the mood passed. He fought down his resentment, the rage died from his face, and he was once again a well-mannered caller visiting friends.

With quite unlooked-for gentleness he murmured:

"You shouldn't have said that, Eliane . . . you of all people!"

She had nerved herself for a fight. But not on these lines. And when she saw a tear welling up between his lashes, she was quite disarmed.

"Sorry! But it's your fault too. You don't realize . . ."

She was pacing up and down the room, her high heels clicking on the tiled floor.

"Oh, it's all as beastly as it can be! That man! I simply can't bear him. It's more than just disliking; I loathe the sight of him. And to think that mamma . . .! Do you know what he said this afternoon? A sort of hint he dropped. No, that's untrue. He doesn't drop hints. He just blurts things out in his horrid vulgar way, with that nasty, self-satisfied laugh of his. Oh, I know he pretended to be joking. But he wasn't. I was watching his eyes, and his fat lips . . ."

She swung round in a sudden rush of indignation, flung the words in Monsieur Serge's face.

"He wants one of us, mother or myself. Either will do. Oh, he didn't put it quite like that. He was friendly. He was drinking his coffee, lolling in that big armchair. An ordinary chair isn't enough for him, you know—even at lunch. He looked fatter than ever! He was saying his house 'wasn't like home' without a woman in it. And then he said that mother and I were so much alike he didn't know which to propose to. Then he added as if it were a sort of joke:

"'Anyhow, as you'll never leave each other, there'll always be the two of you to brighten up my little home.'"

She gazed at the cigar-stumps the brewer had been chewing while he harangued the two women. Unable to keep still, she went on pacing up and down the room.

"I don't know if mamma ever told you about it. But—"

"How long have you been . . . in difficulties?"

She laughed bitterly.

"We've never been out of them—that I can remember! When father died there were all sorts of muddles about the will. We'd thought we were well off, and there was barely enough to live on. Three months ago mamma started hunting round for another girl to come and stay here as a paying-guest. Some girl with chest-trouble like myself. Monsieur Kampf knew all about it. And he knew, too, that mamma won't hear of our going to live at a lower altitude, on account of my lungs."

Had her anger passed? No, even now, when she was pouring out her heart, the grievance that rankled worst of all came to the fore.

"And all the time you were drinking cocktails with that woman! Keeping appointments with her in the woods!"

He could hardly restrain a smile. "You poor little child!" he murmured almost to himself.

"I'm not a poor little child! I'm not unhappy! I . . ."

She couldn't go on. Luckily Madame Meurice came back at that moment. She had washed her eyes, powdered her face. On her lips was the artificial smile she had conjured up as she opened the door.

She gazed at her daughter, then at Monsieur Serge. She seemed much calmer.

"You must excuse us," she said. "We're both in rather a nervous state today. I see no reason to conceal from you—I believe you know it already—that from now on we're the tenants of Monsieur Kampf—who has been most considerate."

Obviously rehearsed. What followed, too.

"So it's too late to think of reconsidering this arrangement. It only remains for me to thank you for your kind intentions

this morning, and for coming to see us now. We need rest, both of us. I'm afraid that for some time to come we shan't be up to seeing visitors."

Her manner was formal, bleakly polite. Eliane was pressing her face to the window, gazing at the valley.

Monsicur Serge was about to reply. His lips parted. . . . No, what was the use? Already she was moving towards the door.

"Goodbye," she said, holding out a limp hand.

He looked round towards Eliane. She did not stir. Her back was turned.

What was the use? Nevertheless he said:

"*Au revoir.*"

He walked down the drive, his shoulders sagging, his eyes following the tracks of the brewer's car. The gardener didn't come forward to open the gate for him. The front door of the chalet had been closed. The two women were alone in the darkening room, with the empty bottles and the cigar-stumps. . . . Stale cigar-smoke hung round the curtains and upholstery; next morning, staler and ranker still, it would recall to them the brewer's presence.

In a clearing in the woods a family was picnicking, one of the children proudly perched on a forked branch. . . .

When Monsieur Serge returned to the *Relais* night had fallen and dinner was almost over. He was so lost in thoughts that he didn't cast his usual glance around the room on entering.

Two things, however, struck him. There was a tremendous din: bursts of loud conversation, singing, and the gramophone going full blast. Of course, he remembered, it's Saturday.

The other thing was more susprising. For the first time for days he was greeted by a young, affectionate voice:

"Good evening, Monsieur Serge. I've laid your place at Monsieur Labbé's table."

Lena was looking her best. Clean apron, neatly curled ringlets, pink cheeks that still smelt faintly of lavender soap. Yes, it was actually Lena speaking to him as in the past, taking his coat and hat, even drawing up a chair for him.

And nobody seemed surprised. More unexpected still, Nick stopped winding the gramophone to shout across the room:

"Had a good walk, Monsieur Serge?"

Only Madame Keller kept a somewhat constrained look, perhaps because too brusque transitions didn't suit her.

Monsieur Labbé was already at the chicken course. Like Nick, he enquired:

"Had a pleasant walk?" Then he looked more closely at his table-companion's face. "What's the trouble? I wonder if, in spite of what you told me, you've failed to solve the mystery of the three doors?"

Why was he laughing? Why that bantering tone?

"All right. I won't keep you on tenterhooks. You don't look in the mood for being teased. Van der Laer's sixty thousand francs have been recovered. Or, to be exact, fifty-nine thousand of them."

Monsieur Serge raised his eyes slowly to the speaker's face.

"Then who . . .?"

"Steady on! I didn't say we'd caught the thief. But the notes have been found in the drawer of the table on which the attaché-case was placed. Which, obviously, gives you another opportunity for suspecting Madame Van der Laer."

Labbé's affability was not quite so spontaneous as it seemed. He was watching his companion's face, noting his reactions.

"So," he continued, "for the third time the problem takes a new form. The notes have been restored. Someone took

them outside the bedroom, for they're stained with oil. Then, for some reason or other, they were brought back. The person who did that can only have been someone who could move about the passages of the hotel without attracting attention. . . . Don't worry. I've had time to question the staff. You've not been seen across there once."

"What wine shall I bring, Monsieur Serge?" asked Lena, who seemed bubbling over with gaiety.

"Don't care!"

"You look as if you'd just been attending a funeral," the Superintendent remarked.

Outside, Fredel was reeling off his usual patter for the benefit of some people who'd just arrived in a big yellow car.

"So you see," said Labbé, "we'll have to make a fresh start. I'm expecting an expert tomorrow from Headquarters to analyse the stains on the notes. That'll give us something to go on."

He leant back in his chair, lit a cigar.

"It comes to this. We're up against a very simple or a very tricky case. Either a common theft—by a servant, for instance, who lost his nerve so badly that he put back the money. Or else there's somebody with brains behind it. In which case the oil-stains are merely meant to put us off the scent. Only one person, so far, seems put out by the new turn of events—Madame Van der Laer. But that may be because women are always thrilled by being mixed up in police enquiries, and she doesn't want the curtain to fall on this one too soon. Unless . . ."

He smiled.

"Really it's fantastic, the number of theories one could build up round the *data* in the case."

He rambled on in this vein for an hour or so. The room was getting noisier than ever. A tipsy young Alsatian

started a solo dance; each of his capers was greeted with a burst of laughter.

At 10 p.m. Monsieur Serge went up to bed.

At 10.15 Labbé took off his shoes, dropped them with a bang, then put them on again. After that he stretched himself, fully dressed, on his bed.

At 11 Nick closed the doors and shutters of the *Relais*. At the *Grand Hotel* the lights went out in the restaurant.

At midnight there were faint rustlings in Monsieur Serge's room, then sounds of shuffling along the wall.

Revolver in hand, the Superintendent slipped off the bed, crept to his window and peeped out. Looking up, he saw a shadowy form moving along the eaves.

Chapter VIII

WATCHES OF THE NIGHT

THE Superintendent did not take the same path as Monsieur Serge. After slipping woollen socks over his shoes, he went down the stairs and out by the front door.

It was a starlight night. The *Grand Hotel* glimmered whitely across the road. To the left of the *Relais* the shop-sign of the fancy-goods shop was creaking in the night-wind.

Monsieur Serge was evidently on a definite errand, for his movements showed no hesitation. He crossed the road to the petrol-pump, walked round the corner of the hotel and entered the open yard round which were the lock-ups for private cars.

Just as he vanished round the corner, Labbé made another discovery. At least two people were lurking in a patch of darkness to the right of the hotel. They weren't talking, but so still was the night that the slight, unconscious movements of their bodies reached his ears. And gazing steadily in that direction, he made out lighter patches in the darkness —doubtless their hands and faces.

One of them stepped forward from the wall and started after Monsieur Serge.

Thus when, a moment later, the police officer made a move, there were three of them, one behind another; while the fourth remained behind in the patch of shadows.

What followed was singular enough. The first man, Monsieur Serge, halted in the centre of the yard, where there was a well and, beside it, the small motor-pump which

supplied the hotel with water. The motor was covered by a small, kennel-like shed.

Monsieur Serge was just about to put his hand inside the shed when he straightened up. He had become aware that someone else was in the yard, beside the wall, watching his movements.

The Superintendent was so much behind the second man that he made no further attempt to conceal himself but walked straight forward, revolver in hand, saying just loud enough for both men to hear :

"Don't move, either of you !"

Twenty people were in the bedrooms overlooking the yard, but nobody awoke. It had all happened in a few seconds, like a well-directed incident in a film.

The first move made by the police officer was to inspect the man who had backed against the wall. It was Fredel, the hotel porter. He looked scared out of his wits.

"Walk towards the well," Labbé whispered.

For a moment he thought of going back to fetch the person, whoever it was, who'd been with Fredel. Instead, he asked him :

"Who was with you ?"

"Where ?"

"Don't play the fool. Who was with you just now on the road ?"

"Gretel."

"Go and fetch her."

Monsieur Serge was still the calmest of the three. It was too dark to make out his expression, but his tall form could be seen in profile. His arms were folded. As the Superintendent came up he asked :

"That was the porter, wasn't it ?"

"Yes. Please tell me what you're doing here."

Instinctively the two men spoke in undertones so as not to attract the attention of people in the hotel.

Without waiting for a reply, Labbé bent over the well, but nothing could be seen in the blackness. He turned to the shed housing the motor.

"Have you a torch?"

"Sorry. I came out without one." For the first time Monsieur Serge's tone was definitely ironical. "But I've matches," he added, producing a box.

Two dim forms approached, hesitantly. Before dealing with the new-comers the Superintendent struck a match and peered inside the shed. The porter whispered apprehensively:

"Take care! There's petrol. Use my torch."

The tiny beam played over cylinders, a belt, a flywheel.

Something became audible in the still night air, a sort of intermittent throbbing, which puzzled them at first. Then, when they looked towards Gretel, they saw her shoulders heave. She was sobbing her heart out in the darkness a few yards away. Her tousled hair made her head seem three times its real size.

A slender young body. Slim shoulders. And a monstrous caricature of a head!

"Under the flywheel." Monsieur Serge, like the kneeling Superintendent, was getting impatient.

At last the beam of the torch fell on something white. Labbé slipped his hand under the flanged rim. When he withdrew it he was holding a wad of notes, which the porter eyed with utter stupefaction.

No one spoke. The lamp had been switched off. The Superintendent scrambled to his feet.

He didn't want to rouse Nick and adjourn to the *Relais*. Nor did he feel like asking his three companions into his bedroom.

"Follow me," he said.

To the right of the hotel, just before the turning, there was a sort of esplanade with a stone parapet. Char-à-bancs and hikers always stopped at this point to admire the view.

Labbé took his stand against the parapet. He had to call Gretel three times before she'd come to him. She was sniffing, trying to keep back her tears.

"What were you up to out of doors at such an hour?"

She burst out crying again, so noisily that Labbé looked up anxiously at the hotel windows.

"I . . . I had to meet Fredel."

"Yes? Are you his mistress?"

It was too dark to make out their faces. But the white blurs of their hands were eloquent.

"We're going to get married."

She didn't dare to look in Monsieur Serge's direction, and kept her back to him.

"Answer my question. Are you his mistress?"

She nodded. The porter put in a word.

"We had to meet like that. Didn't want to set tongues wagging."

Young though he was, not more than thirty, he was already running to fat. Gretel looked a mere slip of a child beside him.

"How long has this been going on?"

"For . . . for a year," she sobbed.

A year! And she was only sixteen! Fredel looked away uncomfortably. The Superintendent asked him:

"When were you going to marry her?"

"When we'd enough money to set up for ourselves."

"What's the idea? A shop?"

"No," he said, not without pride. "A hotel."

"Why did you follow Monsieur Serge?"

"I saw him go by. I wondered what he was up to."
"Right. Go to bed."
"But . . ." He pointed awkwardly to the girl.
"Don't bother yourself about her."
"If you tell Nick or Madame Keller, they'll sack her."
"Go to bed."
"I swear I've not done anything . . ."
"That's enough of it. Clear out!"

Monsieur Serge was standing at a little distance. He had the air of a man who chances to be present at a family quarrel and affects not to notice.

"You, too, Gretel—trot off to bed," said Labbé as the porter opened the service door of the *Grand*.

She hesitated. At last she moved away, still weeping. The Superintendent proceeded to count the notes in his hand.

"Fifty-one, two, three . . . sixty."

He fixed his eyes on Monsieur Serge's as far as the darkness permitted. Now they were alone they could talk as man to man—almost, it seemed, as equal to equal.

"Well?"

Monsieur Serge lit a cigarette. The flame lit up a face that was quite composed, even more so than it had been during the last few days. Its expression was one of bland indifference.

"Well—what? Haven't you tumbled to it? . . . How about walking a bit?"

They strolled up the road, on their left the mountain-side, the valley on their right.

"The explanation's simple—so simple you probably won't believe it! First, I was accused of theft. Then I ceased being suspected—for the benefit, if one may put it so, of Nouchi Van der Laer. Next, there was that business of the three doors. I fell under suspicion again. This afternoon I fancied I'd lit on the truth, and hoped to clear myself completely.

For certain private reasons I hadn't time to take immediate steps. For similar reasons I particularly wanted to be left in peace—at last."

"Madame Meurice?"

"That's as it may be. What matters is that I intended to be free to go where I liked, from tomorrow morning on, and to do that I had to clear myself completely.

"The method I adopted may strike you as a trifle drastic. It would cost sixty thousand francs—but it was worth that to me. Before going in to dinner—you'll remember it was dark when I got back—I slipped across the road and put the notes in a place where they were bound to be discovered first thing in the morning. The hotel mechanic always starts the motor going at five."

His cigarette had gone out. Composedly he relit it.

"At dinner you told me the money'd been recovered. A facer, you'll admit! Imagine my position next morning when another lot of sixty thousand francs turned up! I'd fall under suspicion again. So I went across just now to take back the money I'd 'planted.' And that's all there is to it."

He snapped his fingers—to convey his indifference, or disdain for the vagaries of chance.

"We have still to ascertain," said Labbé meaningly, "if the stolen notes were those found in the drawer, or those beneath the flywheel."

"Very likely the bank that changed Van der Laer's money noted the numbers."

"And we've still to ascertain something even more important—where you got this money. Don't forget that some days ago you couldn't even pay your hotel bill. You pretended to go to Munster to raise money. Unless I'm much mistaken, you went no farther than the chalet. And what little I know of Madame Meurice's circumstances makes it

unlikely she was in a position to lend or to give you so large a sum."

Monsieur Serge said nothing. He had the look of a man out for an after-dinner walk, who is relishing the beauty of a calm starry night.

The Superintendent, however, would not drop the subject.

"One sum only, of sixty thousand francs, was stolen. And this sum has been restored twice within the space of a few hours."

"Singular, I grant you."

"I won't ask what took place at Madame Meurice's this afternoon. . . ."

"Oh, there's no mystery. I was treated like an old friend who's suddenly suspected of being a thief." The bitterness in his voice was tempered by the lightness of his tone. "Have you any more questions to ask me, Monsieur Labbé?" he added.

The two men gazed at each other across a yard of darkness.

"We'll have another talk about it tomorrow."

They walked back in silence. At the hotel door there was an exchange of courtesies.

"After you, Superintendent."

"No, after you."

Both men held their breath as they walked up the stairs. . . .

No sooner had Monsieur Serge entered his bedroom than he stopped dead, a startled look on his face. He glanced round the room, closed the door hastily, and went straight to the bed.

"Hush!" he whispered. There was someone lying on the bed. A low, incessant sound of sobbing. "Hush—for heaven's sake!"

He gazed at Gretel's prostrate form; on his face anger and dismay struggled with compassion.

The door between Labbé's room and his was bolted only. Monsieur Serge hung his coat over the handle to mask the keyhole.

"What does this mean?" he asked severely.

She burst into tears again. He put his hand over her lips.

"Not a sound."

He lit the lamp. Things would look still worse if anyone came in and found them in the dark. Unthinkingly he began fondling her hair, as one strokes the hair of a fretful child to soothe it, murmuring: "Hush now, *please*. My dear little Gretel, do stop crying!"

The effect of the words was quite unexpected. She flung herself into his arms, nestling to his breast. As she dried her eyes she sighed:

"Oh, Monsieur Serge, I'm so unhappy!"

"Ssh! The Superintendent's in the next room. What on earth possessed you to come here?"

She was too overcome by emotion to reply at once. He went on stroking her hair and forehead, trying to calm her. He was horribly embarrassed by the situation. Her cheeks were moist, fever-hot.

"Monsieur Serge, please, please save me! You don't know . . . I swear I don't love him. Honour bright!"

Sometimes his eyes settled on the girl, whose sobs were dying down; sometimes strayed to the door between the two rooms.

"I don't know how it happened. He came across every day for a glass of wine. He talked to me. He said silly things that made me laugh. On New Year's Eve he danced all the time with me, and kissed me. And then . . ."

"I know, my dear, I know."

"No, you can't know. He started talking to me about a hotel we could start together on the Honeck—opposite the

one that's there now, which never has room enough. A posh hotel with bathrooms and waiters in dress-clothes. One day he asked me over to his room to look at the plans he'd drawn. He really had drawn them—in different colours. The front of the hotel, a terrace with trees. I said it would need an awful lot of money. He showed me a wad of banknotes, more than thirty thousand francs, hidden under his mattress.

"'Just now,' he said, 'everyone treats me like dirt. But one day they'll bow low to me. And to you too, if you choose.'

"I was frightened, I don't know why. He took me in his arms."

Again her eyes grew misted.

"It's horrible, what he did. He swore it had to be done; that was the only way of making certain I'd be his wife. After that he always got me to meet him on the road. In the summer there's so many servants at the *Grand* it wasn't safe going to his bedroom. When I missed a meeting with him he used to beat me. And he often told me that, if I let him down, he'd kill me."

She was trying to wipe her tears away with the back of her hand; the little forlorn face was lined with glistening streaks.

"And he's a thief. I don't mind telling *you*. He confessed it to me. He even bragged about it. One of his tricks is to pinch some litres of petrol from the cars that come to the hotel. The other day he found a lady's handbag on the terrace. It had a thousand francs in it, and a little watch set with diamonds. He wanted me to keep the watch. And, when they were looking for the bag, he pretended to be hunting for it like the others."

"It was he who stole Van der Laer's money, wasn't it?"

She nodded.

"That's not all. He can't bear you, in fact he hates you. He's told me so. But that doesn't prevent him shaking hands

with you, and taking drinks from you, and playing cards with you. And guess why he hates you! Because he's jealous!"

She was blushing. Still, there was a glint of satisfaction in the tear-dimmed eyes; at last she'd come out with it!

"He says that women fall in love with you because you've good manners and talk to them nicely. Well, I know that Lena's kept a handkerchief of yours that you dropped in the restaurant, and she often does your room even when it's not her turn."

Again Monsieur Serge cast a worried look at the communicating door.

"Of course he's right in a way. You're quite different from the sort of folk we get here." She had averted her eyes. More than ever she looked like a little fluffy-haired china doll. One of her curls was falling across her face. "It was he who first mentioned your name when that Dutchman's money was stolen. He didn't say anything definite; just dropped hints. I told him it was a dirty trick. He laughed. He said he knew you'd turned my head, like you'd turned my sister's and the two ladies' at the chalet. It was then he told me he'd taken the money.

"'It means we'll have our hotel before the year is out,' he said. 'One more stroke of luck like that and we'll get married, whether you like it or not. As for your friend Serge, I shouldn't be surprised if he goes to jail.'

"That made me wild. He roared with laughter. I tell you, you don't know the sort of man he is. Everyone thinks he's a nice, good-natured sort of fellow. Not he! Do you know what he does when one of the customers doesn't give him a big enough tip? He sticks a nail in his tyre. One young chap was nearly killed that way on the steep bit going down to Gérardmer.

"When the police came, I never thought they'd dare to

suspect *you*." Her manner showed that this had been something of a blow. "But there! It's their job to suspect everybody, I suppose," she added hastily. "I was in a dreadful state! I didn't dare to tell the truth. Fredel might have killed me.

"I saw how sad you were. And you ate hardly anything. So I swore to him that if he didn't put back the money I'd tell the police. He wouldn't believe me at first. Then I fairly lost my wool! I shouted at him. That was last night. He was scared somebody might overhear.

"'You're a silly little fool,' he said. 'I never heard such nonsense!' But he put it back."

She stopped abruptly. Now that she had told everything she seemed aghast at what she'd done. And only now she realized that she was sitting at Monsieur Serge's side, on the bed. She jumped up, blushing.

He was as embarrassed as she. To divert her attention he pointed again to the door leading into the Superintendent's room and whispered, "Ssh!"

"I'll have to be getting back to my room," she said. There was a hint of disappointment in her voice. Had she expected another end to this encounter? Or had she something more to say?

When she was at the door she hesitated; then came back to him.

"Listen! It would be wiser if you went away. Fredel may have been lying, maybe not. He told me that if one day he let out what he knew, you'd be arrested at once. I don't know what he's got hold of. A letter, I expect, as he always goes to meet the postman and looks into his bag. The postman's his cousin, you know."

Her face had grown paler. Suddenly she asked with shy abruptness:

"Monsieur Serge, couldn't I be of use to you? I could keep house for you, couldn't I? I don't want to marry Fredel. I can't bear to think of it."

Another fit of sobbing. She seemed on the point of flinging herself into his arms again. Before she could do so, he took her by the shoulders, made her lie down on the bed, and whispered:

"Now, Gretel my dear, be a good little girl. Keep quite quiet. Not a sound!"

A perplexed look on his face, he started pacing up and down the room on tiptoe, pausing each time he passed the bed to fondle her hair.

At last she dozed off. Utterly worn out, he sank into the only chair in the room. Vaguely he watched the sleeping girl; saw her cheeks grow pink, then glowing red, veiled by a soft golden down.

Chapter IX

THE FUGITIVES

GREY dawn. A leaden sky. Wisps of pale mist trailing up the valley.

Leaning on his crutch, Nick opened the shutters. The stove on which he warmed the coffee every morning was already lit.

And, as he also did every morning, he walked round to the back of the hotel and inspected the wooden outbuilding in which the two girls slept.

"Gretel! Lena!" he shouted.

He pressed his face to the shut windows, trying to see between the curtains.

"Not up yet, lazybones? Won't you never learn . . .?"

He spoke gruffly, but his eyes twinkled. Every morning he went there in the hope of forcing the girls to open the door and let him have a look at them before they'd finished dressing.

"Coming!" said Lena.

"Sure you're not in bed still?"

"No. I'm dressed."

"Dressed, are you? Well, open the door and show yourself."

"Just a moment!"

"Open it at once!"

"Please wait just a second. I'm . . . Right!"

She flung the window open. She was in her combinations, just putting on her garters. On the washstand lay a dirty brush beside a basin of soapy water.

"Your sister's not up yet, I'll lay."

Nick moved to the next window, thumped it.

"Hi there, Gretel!"

Not a sound.

"What's the game? Spending the morning in bed? Want me to come in and haul you out?"

After looking through the window he went to the door and rattled it. To his surprise, it wasn't bolted.

"Well, I'm damned! Sleeping out, is she? Hi, Lena, come and have a look!"

The room was empty. The bed hadn't been slept in.

"Wonder where she spent the night, the little slut!"

Muttering imprecations, he went back to the restaurant and bawled up the stairs: "Come down, Gretel! Come down this minute!"

Alarmed though she was, Lena was going about her work, getting the early breakfasts ready.

"I'll bet she's in Monsieur Serge's room," growled the hotel-keeper. "But he won't get away with it. A child of sixteen! Disgusting, I call it."

He stumped upstairs, his crutch tapping the wooden steps, called her name again, then banged on Monsieur Serge's door.

His wife popped out of another room, half-dressed.

"What are you making all that noise about?"

"What about? Gretel didn't sleep in her bed last night. I'm pretty sure she's with that . . ."

Another surprise was in store for him. Unthinkingly he had turned the handle of the door and, like Gretel's, it opened at once.

There was no one in the room. The bed had not been slept in. But there was a hollow in the quilt, showing that someone had lain on it.

"Well, that beats everything! Monsieur Serge has hopped it too!"

Labbé emerged from his room in his pyjamas, his hair tousled.

"What's that?"

"Monsieur Serge has hopped it. And Gretel's gone with him. My fault. I ought to have kept an eye on 'em. I'd noticed there was something in the wind. But a man of his age . . .!"

The Superintendent walked into the room and at once opened the wardrobe.

"Yes. He's cleared out. His cape and hat are gone."

"So they have."

"And—yes, you're right." He had picked up a hairpin from the carpet. "Gretel must have spent some hours here last night. There's a yellow hair on the bed. What are the nearest railway-stations?"

"Munster in one direction, Gérardmer in the other."

"What trains?"

"None from Gérardmer before six. But there's an early train from Munster at 4.30."

Monsieur Labbé hastily slipped an overcoat over his pyjamas and ran downstairs to the telephone. As he was picking up the receiver, Lena, who was near him, remarked:

"It's too early to 'phone. Our line isn't open before eight."

"What about the *Grand*?"

"The same thing. The telephone doesn't work at night in these parts."

It was six o'clock. The lights were on in the kitchens of the *Grand*. A thin drizzle had set in, the road was shining.

Never had Lena been so ferociously hustled as she was that morning. It was on her that Nick took his revenge. As he hobbled up and down the restaurant he never stopped scolding

and cursing her ; when she started crying he launched out at her with his crutch.

"Your sister's no better than a ——, for all her innocent airs. And you take after her. But I'll learn you, you little slut!"

The tables were still littered with dirty glasses, sawdust lay on the floor, the light was grey.

Upstairs Labbé was searching Monsieur Serge's room. He could hear Madame Keller dressing in hers. His search was quite unfruitful. Nothing of interest in the suitcase which had been left. Two suits, well cut but rather worn. A dozen pairs of socks and golf-stockings. Three pairs of shoes, one studded with nails. An English trench-coat.

None of those personal knick-knacks which tell one something of their owner's tastes. No letters. A few books only: two German novels, one of Claudel's works in French, a complete set of Conrad in English.

At least thirty cigarette-ends on the floor—showing that Monsieur Serge had ruminated for some time before coming to a decision.

When the police officer came downstairs, Lena's eyes were red, Nick was eating in sullen silence.

At last, at eight, Labbé got his telephone call through. It was raining harder than ever. The line was working badly, as a branch had fallen on the wire somewhere in the forest.

The Gérardmer police were asked to make enquiries at the station and all the garages in the town. Similar instructions were given to Munster and Colmar.

Finally the Superintendent rang up Strasburg, Belfort, Nancy, and Paris. When he left the hotel he saw the porter, in a long hooded cape, fixing up something on the petrol-pump. He called him across. Fredel came with a sulky look on his face.

"Do you know that Gretel ran away last night, with Monsieur Serge?"

The porter didn't believe it. Suspecting a trap, he watched the police officer from the corner of an eye without replying.

"Gretel spent part of the night in his room."

"Is that true, Lena?"

When she nodded, an anxious look came to his face. He swore under his breath, then muttered: "Dirty work!"

That was all. . . . Lena kept on bursting into tears. But Madame Keller gave her no peace.

"Don't dawdle! As if it wasn't bad enough, the way your sister's let us down!"

At ten a reply came in from Gérardmer. Nobody answering to the description of either of the wanted couple had been seen at the station.

The report from Munster came in later. It was extremely vague. Two first-class tickets for Strasburg had been issued in the early hours, but the booking-office clerk hadn't seen the faces of the travellers, as the light was bad and, moreover, his window was in frosted glass.

No news from Strasburg, Nancy, or Belfort.

Finally Labbé sent a long telegram to Headquarters in Paris, asking for more information about the 'Commodore' reported at Venice.

All that morning the Van der Laers stayed indoors. The road remained empty, bordered by two torrents of water that swelled as the rain grew heavier. Even the char-à-bancs going through halted only for a moment, and nobody got out.

Thunder was growling in the mountains. By eleven it had got so dark that lamps were lit in the *Relais*. On the other side of the road, too, the dining-room was lit up, and the waitresses could be seen laying the tables for lunch.

Nick couldn't keep still. Fussing and fuming, in a vile temper, he prowled about the hotel. He seemed to regard Gretel's escapade as a personal affront.

"When I think that she was in his room last night, blast her . . . !"

His behaviour got on Madame Keller's nerves, and it was owing to this that Labbé learned the origin of Nick's lameness.

"You'd never believe how jealous that man is!" she confessed to the Superintendent. "He has an idea that all the girls who come here are his private property. Cock o' the roost, that's what he'd like to be. Oh, I've got used to it. . . . And he never stirs a finger to help me, not he! He just hangs round the servants and any young women amongst the customers. Only last month he got a fine black eye for ogling a girl who'd come here with her young man."

Nick, who had overheard, merely shrugged his shoulders, grinning oafishly.

"Oh, he fancies himself as a lady-killer! He started his little games after we'd only been married a few weeks, so I've had time to get used to it. Isn't that so, Nick? Still, it doesn't prevent him being jealous as the devil. The winter before last some young fellows came here for the winter sports, and one of them made up to me a bit. One evening when he was tight Nick took it into his head that the young man was in my room. He drinks like a fish, you know. You've only got to look at his eyes. Well, at one in the morning he started banging on my bedroom door. He woke up everybody in the hotel. Then he began shouting that there was a man in my room, and that he'd brought his gun to shoot the pair of us. I wouldn't open the door. He hammered on it with the butt of his shot-gun. The guests were too scared to leave their rooms. Nice thing to happen

in a well-conducted hotel, isn't it? Suddenly the gun went off and he got the pellets in his leg."

Nick had been shooting meaning glances at the Superintendent, as if to convey: "Don't pay any attention to her. You know what women are!" Aloud he said:

"How about a glass of quetsch, Monsieur Labbé? On the house."

"For Monsieur Labbé with pleasure, if he'd like one. But no drinks for you, Nick. You're quite worked up enough already." She gave an angry laugh. "Oh yes, I know all about it! You're sick to death because Gretel's run away with Monsieur Serge. You were always after her yourself, and it's a smack in the eye for you."

The air in the restaurant was muggy, the windows misted over. Only the geraniums gave a touch of brightness to the room.

Towards noon the porter from the *Grand* came in, shaking the water off his cape. Perhaps he hoped for a talk with the Superintendent. He looked paler than usual, ill at ease. He drank two glasses of spirits in quick succession.

At three came a call from Paris.

"The Italian police report that the Commodore is still at Venice, at the *Tivoli Palace Hotel.* He registered under the name of Boris Morotzoff. His identity papers are in order, and as there's no charge against him, no arrest can be made."

Borrowing a waterproof from Nick, Labbé started out on foot. It was heavy going to the chalet. The path was slippery, and at certain points six inches deep in water.

He knocked at the door.

"Come in."

A cosy, comfortable atmosphere. The leaping flames of a log fire redeemed the bleakness of the light that came in through the windows. Seated at her fireside, Madame

Meurice was putting the finishing touches to a blue blouse she had made for her daughter.

The girl was sitting on a low stool, poring over an English reader, repeating the sentences in a low voice.

The Superintendent was uncomfortably aware of his dripping waterproof and muddy shoes.

"I hope you'll excuse me, madame. I'm extremely sorry to burst in on you like this. I'm a police officer from the *Sûreté Générale* of Paris."

Listlessly she pointed to an empty chair.

"Monsieur Serge, whom you know, disappeared last night, and, if you don't mind, I'd like to ask you some questions about him."

She smiled sadly. "Ask away!"

Eliane's eyes were fever-bright. She gazed at him intently.

"May I begin by asking how you came to know him?"

The pine-logs crackled in the fireplace. As at the *Relais*, the window-panes were misted over. Now and then a great gust swept the forest and the roar of the wind drowned all other sounds.

"It's quite simple," she said. "We lead a very lonely life here. Like her father, my daughter has weak lungs and we came here for her health."

"I'm much better, mamma. The doctor said that except for one weak spot at the top of my right lung . . ."

"Yes, she's getting better, I'm happy to say. . . . When I was told she needed mountain air, I didn't want to separate from her and put her in a sanatorium. That's why we're here. One day about five months ago a stranger called, a Monsieur Serge Morrow. He was extremely apologetic, his manners were perfect. He told me that he'd spent his boyhood in this chalet, and asked my leave to come in for a few minutes. It's true, what he said—he knew the house, I

found, even better than I did. I noticed that he was particularly thrilled when he caught sight of that old clock over there, between the windows. An old friend of his youth."

"You'd never met him before?"

"Never. I spoke to him about my daughter. I mentioned that her lungs were weak. We got into conversation, and I soon found that he too was one of those unhappy people who've been up against trouble of that kind. There's a sort of special jargon one gets into—I wonder if you know what I mean? For instance, I remember his asking me if she had cavities or moist *râles*. He confessed to me that when he lived here as a boy he'd been in much the same state as Eliane. His widowed mother nursed him. I saw how robust he now is. And it gave me hopes for my daughter.

"It was I who asked him to come and visit us again. We got used to him, he called nearly every day. He brought books and gramophone records. He even started giving Eliane English lessons."

She fell silent.

"Is that all you know about him?" Labbé asked.

She blushed.

"Like everybody else, I've heard the stories that have been going round. At first I wouldn't believe them. And then . . . Well, all sorts of little details came back. Exactly the things that made him so attractive. He knows everything. He's been everywhere. He speaks so many languages. I've a few mining shares. One day when I mentioned them he advised me to sell out at once. A week later they'd fallen by half their value.

"Yet he wasn't rich. His clothes were almost threadbare. At first we used to make jokes about that quaint green cape of his, that made him look like a monk.

"He was most tactful. Here's an illustration. We often

asked him to stay to lunch, but he always declined. He must have guessed that it was all we could do to make both ends meet, and what a strain on our resources it was, living here."

Labbé turned to Eliane with some embarrassment and said awkwardly:

"Will you forgive me if I ask if he . . . if there was any sentimental attachment on his part?"

The girl blushed, but met his gaze without flinching.

"Perhaps, as time went on, he began to be a shade more affectionate. But he always behaved perfectly, he never said or did the least thing . . . Oh, I can't even now believe that he's a . . . what they make out. What did you mean by saying he'd 'made off'?"

"He left the hotel last night, and a young chambermaid went with him."

Madame Meurice bent her head over her sewing. Eliane, however, kept her eyes on the police officer.

A silence followed, so uncomfortable that the Superintendent felt impelled to break it.

"I prefer to be frank with you, and I must tell you that this man, whatever he may be, is no common thief. Even if he'd stayed, I doubt if I'd have seen my way to making an arrest. To tell the truth, either this man is one of the most remarkable criminals alive today—who goes by the name of the 'Commodore'—or he's a victim of circumstances."

"You really think . . .?"

"I've had two telegrams assuring me the Commodore's in Venice. Otherwise I'd swear . . ."

"Who is this man you call the Commodore?"

"Somebody quite out of the ordinary run—a master-criminal, as they say. A man whose appetites are vast and who prefers to satisfy them by lawless methods and, I may as well admit it, holds his own against the police of every

nation. A crook, to put it bluntly. But a crook against whom even his victims daren't say a word. A man who juggles with millions and lives like a lord in every capital of Europe. All over the world the police have his description —but it's impossible to arrest him."

"I don't follow."

Outside, the pine-trees shivered in the gale. Summer was over and the season was beginning when one appreciates the cosy charm of a fireside. Labbé made no effort to resist the companionable atmosphere of the room.

"Our laws are far from perfect. Like a net some of whose meshes are too wide. There are some remarkably gifted men who'd have made good in any walk of life, but by the force of circumstances—or because they're built that way—have taken to crime on the grand scale. We arrest thieves, poachers, ordinary murderers. But these master-criminals almost always slip through our nets.

"When the Commodore steals three or four million francs in Nice we can't touch him because he's a respectable American citizen called Morton, the whole American colony vouches for him, and his identity papers are in order. Even his victim refuses to lodge a complaint—more than that, stands up for his good friend Morton.

"We know of three, at most four, men of that calibre. First-class brains. Born leaders of finance or industry, who turned to crime. All we can do is to stay put. Biding our time till one of them makes a slip.

"I'm informed the Commodore's at Venice. Well, I'll swear the Commodore was here last night, under the name of Serge Morrow."

"But," Madame Meurice put in, "he couldn't even pay his hotel bill." She blushed slightly as she spoke.

"I know."

"And would people of the kind you've been describing steal sixty thousand francs from a hotel bedroom?"

The police officer felt the girl's hostile eyes intent on him.

"I'm sincerely convinced Serge Morrow didn't steal that money. All the same, he tried to restore it. Which perhaps goes still further to prove that, appearances notwithstanding, he's the Commodore."

"But you said the Commodore's at Venice."

"What of that? Do you think he's less intelligent than the Italian police?"

Eliane put in a last scornful remark:

"Is it a habit of the Commodore's, running away with chambermaids?"

"If he did so, he had some good reason," Monsieur Labbé said gravely, adding as he rose to go: "You must excuse me, madame, for this intrusion. It was a most distasteful duty, I assure you."

But he had an inkling that both mother and daughter were sorry to see him leave so soon; they'd have preferred to go on talking about Monsieur Serge.

"Now that he's gone away . . ." Madame Meurice began, trying vainly to make her tone sound casual.

"With Gretel!" Eliane laughed bitterly. Then hastily dropped her eyes.

Labbé bowed, without waiting for his hostess to complete her remark. He put on his waterproof, which was still dripping with rain.

"Once again, all my apologies for this visit."

The door stood open. Rain was pattering on the steps, the flowers in the garden were drenched.

"I'm afraid you may have another call from me. . . ."

"That will give us much pleasure," said Madame Meurice. It wasn't a mere polite phrase. She had coloured up as she

spoke. "Unlike Monsieur Serge," she added, "who, whether he's the Commodore or not, will never come again."

A significant little detail. The last words had been spoken impulsively, in a tone of vague regret. And Eliane cast her mother a reproachful look, behind which lay jealousy—a woman's of her rival.

The path was so slippery that Labbé had to cling to the branches of the trees along it to keep himself from falling. When near the hotel, he saw Fredel prowling round the petrol-pump, the hood of his cape drawn low over his forehead.

Chapter X

THE LEAD CASKET

LIKE ripples on the surface of a pool into which a pebble has been dropped, the excitement at La Schlucht soon died down. Perhaps the weather helped. A spell of heavy, incessant rain had set in; the village seemed cut off by walls of water from the outside world.

Still nursing his grievance, Nick had not even the resource of airing it to visitors, for none came. For hours on end he kept the gramophone going full blast and vented his ill-humour on Lena, whom he seemed to hold responsible for her sister's escapade.

Madame Keller, whose energetic temperament had soon recovered from the shock, took the opportunity of giving the hotel a thorough cleaning-out. It was a case of "water everywhere," indoors as well as out of doors. At every turn one stumbled over buckets, splashed through puddles of soap-suds, and the air reeked of brass-polish.

At the *Grand*, Fredel informed them, the guests had settled down to playing backgammon and draughts, or dozing over back numbers of *l'Illustration*.

To everybody's surprise, Labbé was staying on. Apparently he did not regard the case as closed. Next day he borrowed again the hotel-keeper's mackintosh, went to the chalet and had a short talk with Madame Meurice.

It ended with a gesture from the latter, which seemed to signify: "I've no objection."

Thereafter for several hours he prowled round the garden,

foraged in the outhouses and even in the fringes of the adjoining woods. Now and again Eliane joined him in his searches.

"It's you, mademoiselle, who can give me most help. When Monsieur Serge lived here he was a small boy. I don't imagine the buildings can have changed much. And he played in this garden, as I expect you've done. When, after many years, he came back to these parts and wanted to hide something—let's say, money—he'd naturally think of some hiding-place he'd used as a boy.

"Tell me. Three or four years ago, when you were a little girl, what was your favourite place—for playing by yourself, I mean?"

She thought it over.

"The stable, where the goats are now."

"Did you ever try to hide anything?"

"No. I used to lie down there or play with the goats."

But he drew blank in the stable, though he went over every inch of it.

"You didn't play in the coach-house?"

"No, but one of my cousins, a boy, who stayed with us for a bit, used to spend all his time there."

Labbé kept at it doggedly, indefatigably. By four o'clock his clothes were sopping, his shoes water-logged. He had explored every nook and cranny without success. But he was serene as ever.

"I see where I went astray. I assumed a small boy would amuse himself in the same way as a girl of his age. That was silly of me. It was the time when Wild West stories were all the rage. I could swear he rigged up a wigwam hereabouts, with tomahawk and cache complete! Do the youngsters who come on Sundays camp anywhere round here?"

"Yes, at the Table Rock, as it's called."

It was less than a hundred yards from the garden, but one

had to force one's way through a tangle of brushwood to get to it. The ground was slippery. From a crevice in the hillside a spring bubbled up, brimmed over into a tiny rivulet.

"The Table Rock's a bit farther on."

It was exactly what the name conveyed—a slab of stone about a yard square, lying in the bed of a stream; it looked as if it had been planed by a mason, so smooth it was. It was covered by a sheet of crystal-clear water that at the farther edge fell over, forming a glittering curtain about three feet high. On every side was lush green moss.

Eliane followed the Superintendent's movements with fascinated eyes.

"I've often seen boy scouts here," she remarked.

And here, almost certainly, forty years before, Monsieur Serge had played the trapper, or Red Indian chief. It was difficult to see through the veil of tumbling water, but, reaching across it, Labbé found, as he'd expected, that the ground under the stone had been hollowed out.

The cavity was too small to take a full-grown man. But, by crouching, a child could wriggle inside and picture himself hiding from his enemies in a mountain cavern.

Labbé explored with his hand the damp moss-grown sides. It was a long process, but at last he withdrew his arm, hauling out some heavy object.

"Whom does this land belong to?" he asked.

"It used to be mamma's. Now it's been sold along with the chalet to Monsieur Kampf. But it's still leased to us."

"In that case, we'll open it at your house."

It was a lead casket about a foot long by six inches wide. Leeches were clinging to one side of it.

Though it was not yet six, the lamps had to be lit in the living-room. Everything seemed grey, the hue of the rain which had been falling steadily for forty-eight hours; faces

and movements seemed to reflect the dreariness of the day.

Madame Meurice watched the box being opened. It had no lock, and it was almost empty.

Thirty-one thousand-franc notes lay scattered about it. Beneath them the photograph of a lady dressed in the style of the 'eighties. Leg-of-mutton sleeves, a tiny long-stemmed parasol. Standing in front of a landscape painted on a back-cloth, she held a little boy by the hand.

Poor as the likeness was, and faded, it conveyed an impression—especially the woman's face—of poignant sadness. A young woman. Finely moulded features. But the smile-to-order with which she had faced the camera was desperately forlorn.

The boy was wearing a sailor suit, a wide straw hat with curled-up brims.

Madame Meurice's eyes grew misted. She was about the age of that woman, and hadn't she, too, a photograph stowed away somewhere, of herself, smiling, holding her little daughter's hand? And perhaps forty years hence there would be strangers looking at it. . . .

The Superintendent broke in on her musings.

"Unless I'm much mistaken, that's Monsieur Serge as a small boy."

There was only one thing more in the box, another photograph. This one was neither worn nor faded. After a quick glance Madame Meurice lowered her eyes, blushing.

It was a photograph of herself.

"If the whole problem isn't entirely solved," said Labbé, "this box clears up most of the facts. For some reason, Monsieur Serge, who once lived in this chalet, returns to his old house. He brings a hundred thousand francs and hides them in a cache which played a great part in his boyhood.

"These notes were a reserve fund that he didn't mean to broach, for he waited till the last possible moment before doing so. Probably he expected to be getting money sent him.

"He pretended to go to Munster. In reality he came here at night and got the few thousand francs he needed.

"A theft took place that night. He fell under suspicion. When he found he couldn't clear himself he came here again, fetched sixty thousand francs and deposited them at the *Grand Hotel*, where they'd be found next day."

"So you don't think he stole that money?"

"I'm convinced that he didn't," the Superintendent said, as he closed the box.

He took his leave abruptly, as if fearing he might be asked for explanations.

At the hotel a telegram awaited him. He retreated to a corner to decode it. Lena came to see if he wanted a drink.

"A hot grog, please."

The name "Commodore" had caught his eye at once. Pencil in hand, he wrote the words beneath the figures:

Italian police report a double of the Commodore at Venice staying at same hotel under name Serge Morrow and a girl with him stop The two men had an interview stop Italian police enquire should surveillance continue stop Wire reply stop Sûreté Paris.

* * * *

Another wet day. Nick, who was in a vile humour, spent the morning nagging at Lena and the cook.

In the early afternoon the Packard drew up outside the *Grand*. After a while, Madame Van der Laer came down and started off in it. She was back in an hour and a half, which showed she had gone no farther than Munster.

Lena kept on bursting into tears at unpropitious moments —when she was serving a customer with beer, or shelling peas. Each time she did so, Nick flew into a rage.

At three the postman appeared, drenched and spattered with slush up to the peak of his hood, his cycle caked with mud. From his bag he produced another telegram.

Commodore's corpse found Grand Canal Venice stop Awaiting further details.

The dismal day dragged on uneventfully. Grey skies, rain-blurred windows, a film of moisture even on the tables.

Nick kept on drinking and trying to inveigle his solitary guest to join him—for Hertzfeld was away on holiday.

The brewer's car passed on its way towards the chalet, the shabby hood sagging with water. An hour later it passed again, without stopping, in the opposite direction.

From time to time a window opened at the *Grand*, someone gazed out despondently at the downpour, closed it again.

At six a telegram :

Commodore's corpse has scar on nose stop Double registered under name of Morrow has left with girl stop No trace violence on body stop Italian police classifying case as suicide.

Labbé held his peace. He looked depressed. He rang up Paris to make sure no urgent case required his presence there.

"Will you be staying with us some days longer ?" Madame Keller enquired with an engaging smile.

"Can't say. . . . Possibly."

Had he guessed the truth about the theft from Van der Laer's room ? Or had he only an inkling ? In any case, he kept watching the porter in a peculiar way. So much so that Fredel began to feel uncomfortable and ceased coming across to the *Relais* for drinks.

At nine a special messenger from Gérardmer brought another telegram:

Morrow believed to have proceeded Switzerland in big Italian car stop Awaiting confirmation from Swiss police.

A particularly gloomy evening. The Superintendent seemed reluctant to go to bed. He spoke to no one. Nick read the local paper, sipped sugary liqueurs. Resting her elbow on the counter, Madame Keller stared glumly into vacancy. Lena kept sobbing as she tidied up.

By eleven only Nick and Labbé were left in the restaurant; they sat in opposite corners.

At last, at midnight, Labbé rose and, muttering a vague good-night, tramped upstairs.

It was blowing great guns. At dinner the hotel-keeper had remarked:

"We're in for a storm. But perhaps it'll blow itself out tonight, and then we'll have a spell of better weather."

The constant wind and rain had worn everyone out. A nervous exhaustion which made them sleep badly, by fits and starts.

Labbé stayed in bed late, only coming downstairs at nine.

"No telegram for me yet?"

Lena was washing the windows. The road was still wet, strewn with broken branches, draggled leaves.

"Nothing's come. I hear the Gérardmer road is blocked. A big pine-tree's fallen across it. They're shifting it now."

It hadn't yet cleared up, the sky was still overcast. But the clouds were lighter.

"If the sun comes out before midday, we'll be all right."

As a matter of fact, the sun came out round about eleven, but only for a few minutes, just long enough for Madame

Van der Laer to display herself at her window in salmon-pink silk pyjamas.

The road was drying in patches. On the terrace of the *Grand* the porter set out again the gaudy sunshades. At 11.30 the Dutchman appeared, ordered a whisky and settled down to reading an Amsterdam daily paper which the postman had just brought.

When the event took place it was exactly ten to twelve. Labbé, who had heard a car come up, was standing at the door of the *Relais* watching Monsieur Kampf, who, flushed and furious, was wrestling with a punctured tyre. Nick, in a white coat, had hobbled out into the road and, leaning on his crutch, seemed about to give advice to the perspiring brewer.

Lena was cleaning the chairs and tables on the terrace, Van der Laer was still engrossed in his newspaper.

Kampf straightened up.

"Come and lend a hand, Fredel."

But Fredel, who was gazing down the Gérardmer road, seemed disinclined to move.

"Hurry up, confound you!"

No, he wouldn't budge. He pricked up his ears. The sound of an approaching car was growing audible. La Schlucht being at the summit of a five-mile rise, most cars roar up towards it in low gear. But there was nothing of a roar in the sound of this car. Only a gentle purr.

Holding his hands well away from his body, so as not to soil his clothes, Kampf shouted again:

"Hey, Fredel! Why the devil don't you come?"

But Fredel was already hastening down the steps to meet the car which was swinging round the corner, displaying a lemon-yellow bonnet, black wings, a resplendent silver radiator.

The Van der Laers' Packard was standing beside the petrol-pump, and as this car glided by it, it was seen to be even longer and more powerful than the Dutchman's.

Dumbfounded, the chauffeur stared at the new-comers. Van der Laer peeped over his newspaper. Nick exclaimed enthusiastically:

"Some car!"

It drew up in front of the main entrance of the *Grand*. Fredel hastened forward, but before he could reach the handle of the door, a chauffeur in livery with lemon-yellow facings matching the bodywork of the car sprang out from the back and opened it.

The faces of the two people in the front seats were in shadow. Pigskin driving-gloves on the wheel. A light grey suit. Beside the driver, a young woman who was turning her head in all directions like a whirligig.

Madame Van der Laer's window opened again. A head and shoulders hung out.

The chauffeur, standing stiffly to attention, waited beside the open door. A man stepped down, extending his hand towards the lady with him, to help her to alight.

It was one of these quasi-regal arrivals such as La Schlucht witnesses, with luck, two or three times a year. Already the proprietress was at the door, the staff flattening their noses against the panes.

The Packard with its dark bodywork cut a humble figure beside its rival, dazzling yellow, and a good yard longer.

The traveller said something to his chauffeur. The man bowed.

"Well, that beats everything!" Nick muttered.

The young woman looked a mere slip of a thing beside her companion, who now, gazing steadily ahead, was walking towards the entrance of the hotel. She was wearing an olive-

green coat; a superb snakeskin vanity-bag was tucked under her arm. Her hands were gloved in darker green, to match her dress.

She kept on trying to turn her head in the direction of the *Relais*, but the man gave her no time to stop.

Dropping her duster, Lena shrieked *crescendo*:

"Gretel! Gretel!!"

For by now everyone had recognized the driver of the car as Monsieur Serge. The brewer had forgotten all about his punctured tyre; his cheeks were crimson, he looked as if at any moment he might have an apoplectic fit. Nick Keller hurried away as fast as his crutch could carry him, to call his wife.

Madame Van der Laer's window closed with a bang.

Meanwhile Monsieur Serge had entered the *Grand Hotel*.

"I'll take the whole of the first floor."

Outside, the porter was gazing sulkily at the big yellow car.

A brand-new car, fitted in sumptuous style. The merest novice could see it had cost a good half-million francs, and everyone had turned out to admire it.

Lena, who was weeping more copiously than ever, picked up her duster and began to mop her eyes with it. Purple with rage, Kampf yelled:

"Damn you, Fredel! Why don't you come when you're called?"

The door of the *Grand* opened. The proprietress was seen to go up to the Dutchman. With obvious reluctance he followed her inside.

What passed between them was divulged that evening by the telephone girl, who had overheard from her nook.

"May I know how much longer you expect to be staying, Monsieur Van der Laer?"

"Four or five days."

"I'm so sorry, but I must ask you to move up a floor, to another suite. It's exactly like the one you're occupying now."

He couldn't make it out. He protested. But the proprietress was adamant.

"I've let the whole first floor for two months, paid in advance. I can assure you you'll find your new rooms just as good. These people are in a hurry. If you've no objection, as soon as Madame Van der Laer is dressed the chambermaids will move your things. You won't have any trouble at all."

In their private sitting-room Monsieur Serge was saying to Gretel, whose cheeks were quivering under a pink shell of amateurish make-up:

"Stick it out, Gretel! Don't forget your promise."

"It's because of Lena. What must she be thinking? I feel so horrid. . . ."

She buried her head on his breast, sobbing.

A quarter of an hour later, a small procession of chambermaids filed up the stairs, carrying the valises, clothes, and paraphernalia of the Dutch couple who had been bundled out of their rooms like poor relations when a rich visitor arrives.

Meanwhile Nouchi was storming away at her husband.

"I never heard of such a thing! Why do you let that rotter treat us like dirt?"

Van der Laer bowed his head beneath the storm; he abhorred scenes above all things. At last he ventured on a timid protest:

"But, my dear, he's taken the suite for two months. Really, it's only natural . . ."

"And suppose I tell you to take it for three months, or four —why not a year while you're about it?"

Leaning against the door of the *Relais*, Superintendent Labbé was placidly puffing a cheap but excellent French cigar.

Chapter XI

ONE MAN LESS

THEY had had to lock Lena up in her room. Furious at not being allowed to go across the road to see her sister, the girl had gone into hysterics. So it was Madame Keller who served lunch.

Nick sat near the brewer, who also was in a vile temper. He had not found anyone to mend his tyre. After lunch he would have to get down to the distasteful job himself.

Only Superintendent Labbé seemed quite unruffled—and his indifference put the others' back up.

"It's scandalous! A man like that, who came here in rags and tatters, who couldn't even pay his bill . . . !"

"And by rights should be in jail."

Kampf shot a threatening glance at the Superintendent and remarked loudly:

"Anyhow, I don't intend to let the matter drop. I've a good friend who is a Deputy. I'll get in touch with him tomorrow and tell him all about the case. Are Gretel's parents still alive?"

"No, worse luck! The girls are orphans."

"Because it's a flagrant case of abduction, a criminal offence."

The car was being driven round the *Grand Hotel* into the garage. The first-floor windows were flung open, to air the rooms for the new-comers.

"I must say I'd like to know where he stole that car of his," growled Kampf. "Cars like that shouldn't be allowed

on the road. They're not only a public danger but a provocation to the workers."

His own car still lay derelict outside the hotel, leaning on the flat tyre. The hood was flapping; it looked as if at any moment the wind might carry it away.

Labbé ate his meal in silence, staring at the floor. When it was over he rose and walked up and down the road till the clock struck three.

Then, judging that lunch must be over at the *Grand*, he crossed the road, the casket under his arm.

"Under what name has your new guest registered?"

"Serge Morrow." The proprietress sounded anxious. "I say, there's not going to be any more bother, is there? Madame Van der Laer has told us that if these people have their meals in the restaurant she'll leave at once. Luckily they lunched in another room."

"Have they finished lunch?"

"Yes, they're having their coffee and liqueurs. It's all right, isn't it, Superintendent, their staying here?"

It was the proprietor's private sitting-room that had been requisitioned. The armchairs had been left, and seated in one of them Monsieur Serge was smoking a Havana and watching Gretel, who was eating a peach, with half-closed eyes.

"Come in." He did not rise as the Superintendent entered, nor hold out his hand. He merely pointed, not to an armchair but to an ordinary straight-backed chair. Somehow he gave an impression of being taller. He looked quite composed; his least gesture had a languid grace.

"So you found the casket!"

Poor Gretel! She didn't dare look at the visitor. She seemed ill at ease in her pretty dress. And an eminent coiffeur had given her hair a new wave that had changed her appearance for the worse.

She still looked like a doll. But a badly assembled doll. She didn't know how to handle her fruit-knife, it kept slipping off the peach on to the plate—which flustered her still more.

"Go upstairs, my dear. I'll join you later." His tone was affectionate, but distant. "Try to sleep a bit."

He rang for the waiter.

"Leave the liqueurs on the table and bring another glass. And the box of cigars."

He waited till the order had been carried out and Gretel had closed the door behind her. Then his eyes settled on the Superintendent. He asked:

"Have you anything to tell me?"

"First of all, I want to give you this casket, which, I believe, is yours."

Monsieur Serge indicated that he could put it on the table.

"Is that all?"

The room was a small one, decorated in the meretricious "modern style" that one finds in most recently built hotels. The furniture was shoddy. Bleak autumn sunlight glimmered on the panes.

"Needless to say," Monsieur Serge continued with a faint sigh, "my identity papers are in order. I'm Serge Morrow, director of a dozen companies, and if you hope to find anything wrong in my passports, you'll be disappointed."

There was a hint of weariness in his voice.

"Is it this 'Commodore' business that's keeping you here?"

He rose to his feet, and of a sudden he seemed quite different from the Monsieur Serge whom Labbé had known; younger, much more forceful. He walked to the door, opened it quickly, made sure no one was behind it, closed it carefully.

"You've no warrant of arrest, I presume? No. Anyhow it wouldn't be of the least use. There's no charge against me.

And a hundred highly placed people would gladly vouch for the character of Monsieur Serge Morrow. . . . But I'm glad you've come to see me. Yes, I mean it. You're a good sort, Superintendent. An excellent employee, whom the State pays two thousand six hundred francs a month, and whose services are worth much more."

The tone was patronizing, but not in the least offensive—so wide was the gulf that suddenly had yawned between the two men in the room.

"I told you I was glad to see you because, for the second time in my life perhaps, I'm in a mood for talking about myself. There's no one to overhear us. And obviously I'd deny everything if you started repeating what I tell you. You'd only lose your job. Yes, I assure you! I've had two of your best colleagues broken for less.

"Do I understand you really mean to give me back that casket? Don't bother, all I want is a photograph—of a young mother and a little boy. As for the rest . . ."

He spoke indifferently, but none the less he sighed.

"Chartreuse, Armagnac, brandy?"

He poured out two glasses of Armagnac.

"Did you get a wire to say the Commodore was dead, I wonder? No, don't ask my real name. You've found out that I spent my boyhood at the chalet. That's all you'll ever learn. You can make all the enquiries you like, but they won't get you any forrader. No one needs to know who the Commodore is. And anyhow, what would you gain by it?

"Really you know almost as much as I do about him, don't you?

"Millions got by swindling people who, as a matter of fact, had more money than they knew what to do with. And were out to make even more.

"But that's not what I wanted to speak to you about. . . .

Here's luck! No, I want to talk about an episode of my life in which you've played a part.

"You've never been rich. A pity. The police should employ people who've been in every station in life; they'd understand things better.

"Look up your records again. The Commodore made three millions at Prague, five at Berlin, two at Budapest . . . and so it went on, over a period of twenty years.

"People envied him. 'The happiest of mortals!'

"Then one fine day the Commodore found he'd had enough of it. He took a trip to a little out-of-the-way place which had sentimental associations for him.

"What did you say? Nothing? I thought . . . Do have a cigar. These Havanas are in excellent condition. . . . And, do you know, they set me thinking of a fag-end I picked up in the street when I was twenty. Never since then have I enjoyed a smoke so much!

"No. Don't interrupt. Try to realize . . . Try to imagine an adventurer who's knocked about the world, learnt by experience there's nothing money can't buy—and yet has kept somehow, deep down in himself, a hankering for the simple life, the life of an ordinary man.

"It was as an ordinary man he came here. He'd discovered a fellow who looked extremely like him. That, by the way, is an idea worth looking into. Everybody has one or two 'doubles' in the world. It's only a matter of hunting round. Picture a clever criminal who has at his disposal three or four men just like himself. Not only would he outwit the police every time, but there's nothing he couldn't do.

"I needed only one. I coached him. He was down-and-out when I discovered him, and he seemed reliable. I said to him:

"'Till further notice you shall be the Commodore. This

is how it's done. . . . All I ask of you is to remit four thousand francs a month to such and such an address.'

"I left the future undecided, so that, if he let me down, I could go back to the old life.

"I came here with a hundred thousand francs, to provide for emergencies, and hid the money at the place where, as a boy, I'd played at being a Red Indian.

"Two months went by. No car. No servants. The simple life of the *Relais d'Alsace*. And at the chalet I found something even better than memories of my youth. A nice woman, a mother like the mother I'd loved. . . . And a little girl.

"It was sheer joy, roaming for hours about the mountains, eating, drinking. . . . Unsophisticated pleasure, the sort that money can't buy.

"And a subtler, profounder joy up there at the chalet—a good woman's company. Make no mistake. Not a word passed between us. But I persuaded myself. . . I toyed with hopes. . . .

"The fellow who was carrying on as the Commodore forgot to send the money we'd agreed on. No, he didn't forget. I'd asked him to be my understudy. He took the part in earnest. He came to think he *was* the Commodore and could snap his fingers at the real one.

"So I had to visit my cache and take a few thousand francs. That night the theft took place. And Nouchi crossed my path—Nouchi who'd been my mistress at Budapest and helped me to do her husband out of several millions. After which I'd dropped her.

"She had her revenge. I was accused of a sordid crime, not in my line at all! I'd ceased to be the Commodore. I was a poor devil, Monsieur Serge, who'd stolen sixty thousand francs. I was spied on, cold-shouldered by everybody. A pariah.

"And I'd been dreaming of a very different life, up at the chalet. Crazy, wasn't it? At the chalet it was a near thing I wasn't shown the door!"

A change came over his expression. His voice grew harsh.

"And I deserved it. You can't understand, of course. But lapses of that sort are—inexcusable. When a man's chosen his path in life, he sticks to it, and doesn't start looking longingly at sentimental side-tracks. The Commodore turned into a law-abiding citizen! It couldn't work, his wings would be clipped right away. Which was what that fool at Venice thought had happened; and he tried to keep the whole spoils for himself. And up here, fellows like Nick had the nerve to cross my path. . . .

"The Commodore playing the guardian angel, rescuing the widow and her daughter from the clutches of Monsieur Kampf! Absurd!

"So that's that. The Commodore's his bad old self again! You have him in front of you, Superintendent, and I defy you to bring any charge whatsoever against him. . . . Well, what do you propose to do about it?"

His tone was curt.

"I came back to this place to tell you that, and to let these people who treated Monsieur Serge like dirt have a look at the Commodore."

"Perhaps," suggested Labbé quietly, "to get back two photographs as well."

"One."

"In that case, shall I destroy the other?" He made as if to tear up Madame Meurice's portrait.

"Please yourself."

"No, I'm not so heartless as all that. . . . Just one thing. Do you realize that you're treating Gretel rather badly?"

It was the Commodore, the sceptical adventurer, who answered him.

"You know whose mistress she was, don't you? The porter's. And do you know who, when she was only fourteen, thought fit to seduce her? Nick. Personally, let me tell you, I haven't touched her. And I don't suppose I ever shall. I don't even want to. A poor little child . . ."

"Whom you've merely used as a tool for taking your revenge."

"A poor little child to whom I'll give two hundred thousand francs tomorrow or next week, to do what she likes with." Again there was an undertone of sadness in his voice.

"The two hundred thousand," Labbé put in gently, "that you'd thought of giving another woman."

Suddenly the Commodore asked impulsively:

"You've been to the chalet. What did they say?"

"Nothing much. . . . Did you know that Kampf is here, with a flat tyre?"

Monsieur Serge chuckled, poured himself out another Armagnac.

"He'll marry her. . . . No doubt it's better so."

There was a long silence.

"Yes, it was too good to be true. Like a view on a picture-postcard."

"By the way. . . . One of the two Commodores is dead. His body was found in a canal, at Venice."

"So you've heard already?"

"And the other one's taken his place. Which means . . ."

"Which means, Monsieur Labbé, that when a man's fifty there's no breaking with the past. I can be quite frank, nobody's listening, and if you repeat anything I say, I'll simply deny having said it. One day, in a weak moment, a man felt a desire to settle down in a quiet spot. And it's

precisely in that quiet spot he ran up against his greatest difficulties. Because he wasn't smartly dressed any more, hadn't a big car, didn't talk like someone who's used to being obeyed.

"Then he came back with his car, lots of money in his pocket. . . . Look here! What'll you bet Madame Van der Laer won't run away with me tomorrow if I ask her?" There was little arrogance, rather a note of melancholy, in his voice.

Again it changed abruptly, grew harsh, metallic.

"Net result—a corpse in the Canal. A case of suicide according to the police. . . . When you leave this room, Monsieur Labbé, we'll be enemies again. So much the better. All I ask is: Make the fight as bitter as you can. Strenuous enough to give me an interest in life."

Without another word he left the room. In the first-floor suite of evil memory, Gretel lay sleeping on a bed. Her skirt had rucked up, displaying a rather sturdy leg, sheathed for the first time in real silk.

Through the window, beyond a green expanse of forest, the roof of the chalet could be seen.

Monsieur Serge pressed the button of the electric bell.

"Tell the proprietress to come."

Surprised but deferential, she looked at him enquiringly.

"We're leaving in an hour."

"But—"

"Don't worry. You can keep the money I've given in advance for the two months. Send the porter here."

The blinds were down, the room in semi-darkness. Gretel was still sleeping on the bed.

Fredel appeared on the threshold, blushing.

Monsieur Serge went up to him and, like a man yielding to a sudden, exasperated impulse, smacked him in the face.

"That's all," he said promptly. "Here's a hundred francs for you. Clear out!"

He shut the door in the man's face. And Fredel never realized what was behind that blow—not a mere outburst of temper, but the avowal of a whole life's failure.

When, towards four, Kampf saw the car starting off again, he guffawed.

"Good riddance!"

From her second-floor window Madame Van der Laer cast an envious glance at Gretel.

Nick sniffed ironically.

"Just swank! He wanted to show off his car. And Gretel —who's lost her looks, the silly fool."

A faint purring in the distance. Already the car was vanishing round the bend.